

Ohio State Route 56 and Other Stories

Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation *with research distinction* in  
English in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

by

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June 2012

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### Terminator vs. T-1000

David Achilleus rounded the back corner of the garage unit after passing the door numbered sixteen. Seconds earlier, David's older brother, Donny, afforded his escape around the garage by firing a pair of shells into David's molten metal ribcage. Sporting a pair of plastic sunglasses with neon orange frames, and pretending that his fist was the muzzle of a sawed-off single-barreled shotgun, Donny now awaited David just beyond the eaves spout to administer a finishing blow. Before David could form one of his arms or fingertips into a spike with the hopes of impaling his adversary, Donny pumped his forearm and (using his mouth to create the sound effect of shotgun blasts) unloaded two more shells into his brother's chest. On each impact, David flung his torso backwards to imitate T-1000 in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*.

"Oscar la Visa, baby," Donny said and pumped his forearm to ready another shot. As with the blasts, his mouth supplied the sound effects for cocking his shotgun. He aimed and waited to meet his brother's eyes.

“Don’t finish me yet,” David said, once he was recovered from the blasts. He cupped his hand over Donny’s clenched fist, unafraid that a slip of the trigger in their game of pretend would splatter his hand into bits of metallic ooze all over the blacktop. “We have to put on a chase scene like the one in the movie.”

“What are you going to drive?” Donny said. He wiggled out of David’s grasp and lowered his weapon to his side. “Your bike chain’s broken.”

“I don’t need a bike. I’ll just run after you on yours.”

“You can’t make running look like you’re driving a semi. Don’t you want to act out the scene where T-1000 steals a semi and chases the Terminator and John Connor from the mall?”

“Let’s act out the scene where T-1000 chases the cop car from the mental institution,” David said. “He’s on foot in that one.”

“My bike looks more like a motorcycle than a cop car,” Donny said. “Terminator only drives a motorcycle at the beginning of the movie.”

“Your arm doesn’t look like a shotgun, but you use it as one. Anyway, my bike wouldn’t look anything like a semi if we did the mall scene.”

With the collar of his number thirty-three Chicago Bulls jersey, the back of which read “Pippen,” David wiped a bead of sweat that trickled down his forehead. Donny owned a number twenty-three Bulls jersey that had Michael Jordan’s name on the back. They never wore their Bulls jerseys on the same day to school after David complained to their mom that he didn’t want Donny copying him or dressing like they were teammates. It was bad enough that their mom bought Donny’s jersey in red, when David gave her clear orders that he didn’t want it to be the same color as his. All the sports-ignorant kids at Prairie Norton Elementary School who didn’t know the NBA from the WNBA already confused David’s number thirty-three with his brother’s

twenty-three, and thought that the two Achilles brothers were sharing each other's clothes like a couple of kids who shopped at the Salvation Army for more than just long pants. Those were the kind of kids who slung two-by-fours over their shoulders and lived down the road at Autumn Springs Apartments, where they fished in the manmade pond for goldfish and guppies. All those kids were into "sagging" and watching episodes of *Beavis and Butt-head* recorded on their VCRs. Moms never followed orders, even when they meant the difference between fashion statement and utter humiliation.

"My arm looks more like a shotgun than your finger looks like a metal spike," Donny said. "Besides, we can't do the mental institution chase scene because you're not fast enough to keep up with me."

"Am too," David said. He smoothed his damp blond bangs after readjusting his jersey collar over the collar of his white undershirt. He never wore the jersey without sleeves underneath because he didn't want other kids in class—let alone his older brother—to see the lumpy part of his chest around his armpit. No all-star NBA sharpshooter would show that kind of skin.

"You've never even beat me in a foot race," Donny said. "I'm way faster on my two-wheeler."

"Mom says you're only faster because I'm a growing boy," David said.

"Mom says I'm a growing boy, too."

"I'm a year behind you."

"So? I was still faster than you at your age. You probably won't be as fast as me even when your legs are as long as Dad's. You're going to be buying husky jeans the rest of your life."

David's jean shorts were a size sixteen husky. He no longer fit into regular sizes, or slims, like Donny. He could eat three glazed donuts off the conveyer belt at Krispy Kreme in one sitting. His brother never ate more than one. Last week at the doctor's office, during David's visit for a one hundred degree fever he was running, the nurse weighed David twenty pounds overweight for nine-year-olds when he took off his L.A. Gears to stand on the beam balance scale. Even though Donny wasn't sick, and even though he would have preferred to stay in the waiting room to solve the Hidden Pictures sections in old issues of *Highlights for Children*, he was forced to come back with his younger brother to see the doctor because his mom warned him that he was going to get taken home by a stranger. (Strangers were lurking everywhere to take Donny and David home with them—whether it was at the doctor's office, the Kroger grocery store, or the front half of the apartment complex near the putting green.) Standing in his tube socks on the scale, David cringed as the nurse's purple fingernails guided the slider along the beam. With each clink and with each additional pound, he imagined his brother whispering the word "tub."

Donny turned towards the apartment buildings and started across the parking lot. The A/C unit in the yard kicked on and began to hum in the hot wind.

"Where are you going?" David said.

"I'm going to get the garage opener from Mom so we can get my bike," Donny said. "I'll let you do the mental institution scene, but I'll have to pedal slower so you can keep up."

David burst forward to catch up with his brother.

"I'll keep up," he said. "You go ahead and pedal as fast as you can. If you slow down too much, I'll end up putting my spike through your back." He gave the air an uppercut, his fingers

not clenched into a fist but instead bunched into a shape closely resembling a shark fin, to demonstrate what the Terminator's impaling would look like at the hands of T-1000.

"Even if you do, Terminator still has to win," Donny said. "The good guy never loses."

David waited outside on the front patio while Donny went inside the apartment to get the garage door remote. The patio, floored with a beige sidewalk that was patterned to resemble bricks, was closed off from the yard and the next-door neighbor's patio by a white fence with wooden bars that crossed at diagonals to make miniature diamonds that David used as peepholes. He peered through one of the diamonds at the landscaper hired by Abbington Village Apartments to mow the grass. The man rode a garden tractor and wore a navy blue tank top drenched with sweat stains at the underarms and the chest. To shield his eyes, he wore a once-black Nike baseball cap that was faded brown by the sun. As he looped around the pair of pine trees at the end of the yard, which the Achilles brothers used as endzone markers during their pick-up games of football, Donny reappeared with the garage door remote. He went to the edge of the apartment building and aimed the remote at the garage numbered eight across the parking lot. The door began to open, gradually unveiling the back bumper of a powder blue Plymouth. The two Achilles brothers sprinted together to the garage.

Donny's bike was red-orange with a cylinder foam pad secured to the top tube of the frame by a cover with a black-and-white checker pattern and Velcro strips. David's bike, which had a black frame with purple rubber handle grips and was decorated with pictures of fighter jets along the top tube, was parked beside Donny's against the garage wall. It would be out of commission for at least another week until David and Donny's dad could take them back to a Toys "R" Us and ask a store clerk about a replacement chain. Both brothers bought their bikes a year ago while they were on clearance at Toys "R" Us. Donny's rode higher, though the two

brothers were now the same height, with David growing two inches over the past year and Donny growing only a half inch, according to the records at the doctor's office.

"I'll take the remote back to Mom," Donny said, as he wheeled his bike out of the garage onto the blacktop that was faded into the color of the silverback gorillas Donny and David saw at the Columbus Zoo. Gorillas were Donny's favorite primates. Once Donny chose a favorite of anything—whether it was primates, professional athletes, or movie characters—David had to choose a different favorite, even if Donny's choice reflected David's true interests. Orangutans were David's favorite primates, or at least he claimed.

Donny pressed the button to close the garage door and sprinted back to the apartment with the remote. While he was gone, David grabbed his brother's bike by the handlebars and took it off its kickstand. He attempted to throw his leg over the seat, but his shoe knocked against it because he didn't get his leg high enough and he had to make a second attempt before he was sitting upright on the bike. He began to pedal down the row of garages but braked by scraping the soles of his shoes against the pavement when he heard a car engine start up behind him in the far end of the parking lot, near the pair of brown dumpsters. In Mrs. Fife's third grade class, David authored short pieces of creative fiction on his own initiative and every month gave a public reading in front of his classmates. He once wrote about a time that his dad supposedly let him climb inside the dumpsters to help retrieve a thirty-six-inch TV set that one of their neighbors had thrown out because it was missing the Up Volume, the Down Channel, and the MENU buttons under the screen. Out of fear that he might get tattled on as a copy-cat, he didn't explain that the narrative didn't come from his own experience, but that it was a story he heard told to him by a second grader. When Mrs. Fife met David's mom on parent-teacher conferences

night, she said she was on the verge of calling a social worker. David had many other stories that he borrowed from second graders.

Donny came to the edge of the yard from the apartment and waited for the car to pass before he darted across the parking lot.

“Get off my bike,” he said, taking hold of the handlebars and reaching with his foot past David’s leg to put the kickstand back in place. “You’re not going to be the Terminator for this chase scene.” He pulled out his plastic sunglasses with the neon orange frames and opened them with a flick of the wrist to imitate Terminator in the bar fight scene after “Bad to the Bone” begins to play in the background. He pushed them up the bridge of his nose and David climbed off the bike.

“I wasn’t going to be Terminator,” David said. “My favorite’s T-1000.”

“Go run to the mailboxes and tell me if there are any cars starting to back out on the other side of the garages. When you give me the thumbs up, I’ll ride past you and we’ll start the chase scene.”

David ran to the front end of the garage unit where there stood a set of twin mailboxes on a concrete slab with individual lockers for all the apartment units on Crownwood Drive. He scanned the other side of the garages for cars, and when he saw that the way was clear, he gave Donny his signal. Donny started down the row of garages in a standing position on the pedals to pick up as much speed as possible before he got to David. He flew past David and nearly tipped his bike as he skidded around the corner. David waited until his brother was past the other side of the mailboxes and then he took off after him on foot. He usually ran with clenched fists, but to imitate T-1000’s running style in the movie, he chased after Donny with open palms, karate-chopping the air. Donny, who remained standing for the first half lap around the garage unit,



glanced around at the villain who trailed him within ten feet, clad (at least in the brothers' collective imagination) in a blue police uniform to disguise his devious mission to kill John Connor. He sat down and released one arm from the handlebars long enough to graze a shotgun shell off David's shoulder. David flung his upper body back as though his liquid metal composition were able to absorb the wound without taking him out of hot pursuit.

Donny led his brother around the garage unit for a total of two and a half laps until he ended the chase scene once again at the back wall. By the time David caught up with Donny, he had already leaned his bike against the wall and was standing with his palms flat against one of the dumpsters, preparing an ambush. Panting, David turned that direction when he heard the sound effect of a cocked shotgun. He approached the dumpsters holding up his arm as a spike.

"Where's John?" David said.

"Oscar la Visa, baby," Donny said, as he popped out of hiding, pointing the muzzle of his shotgun squarely at John Connor's would-be assassin. He fired once, reloaded, fired again. David flung his body back with increasing force. The Terminator tore off his shades to view his opponent plainly in the sunlight and tossed them aside on the freshly cut grass. They landed softly on the lawn as though on the quilt that Donny slept under every night that presented the story of the *Three Little Pigs* in a series of pictures.

He cocked his shotgun again and attempted to fire, but this time he pretended that he was out of ammo and his weapon only clicked when he pulled the trigger. The wounds that had been inflicted on T-1000 soon began to heal, and he straightened himself, wagging his finger in Terminator's brown eyes.

"Tell me: where's John?" David said. He bunched his fingers together again in an effort to make them appear like a metal spike and stabbed his brother in the gut. Donny doubled over

and David took his hand away and let his brother sink to his knees on the blacktop. He closed his eyes and dropped his head as though he were the desktop computer in their living room with Windows 95 undergoing shut down procedures. His facial expression was overcome with the blankness of their monitor when it displayed the message “It’s now safe to turn off your computer.”

“You’re not going to let me win this one, are you?” David said, breaking character with the confused tone in his voice.

Donny answered from the ground without lifting his head or opening his eyes.

“You’re not out to kill me, you’re out to kill John Connor,” he said. “So, you leave me like this without worrying if I’m finished or not. Then, I boot up with backup power, find two more bullets, and finish you off.”

“What do you want me to do? Just walk away from you?”

“Just walk away from me. Then, when you hear my footsteps behind you, you can turn around.”

Following his brother’s orders, David left Donny on his knees on the parking lot blacktop and walked towards the bike against the garage wall constructed with multi-colored bricks. He listened intently for his brother’s footsteps as the signal to turn around. When he heard them, he was within a yard of the wall.

“Oscar la Visa, baby,” Donny said, once again with his eyes hidden behind the plastic shades. He cocked his shotgun, and this time it was apparent from his sound effects that he intended no misfire. As David flung his head backwards from the impact, he wiped a drop of Donny’s spittle from his eye. Donny cocked again for the final blow while his brother peered

back at him half-blinded. He fired, and this time when David flung his head backwards, he miscalculated how close he was to the brick wall and smacked his skull against it with a *thud*.

“Ow!” David said, and clutched the back of his head. He wasn’t sure if he blacked out for a split second.

“Are you ok, David?” Donny said. “Did you hit your head? It sounded like a bowling ball dropping on the floor.”

“I’m okay. I think it’s going to leave a bump.”

“Can I feel it?”

“You’d better not.” David began to rub his wound moving his palm in a circular motion on his crown. “Get your bike, and I’ll meet you back home.”

“Are you done playing?” Donny said.

“Let’s just say you finished me there,” David said.

Donny wheeled his bike away from the wall and got on it.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay?” he said over his shoulder to David. “I’ll tell Mom what happened.”

“You don’t have to bother her,” David said. “I’ll be fine.” He squatted on the pavement, his back against the wall, his palm still moving in a circular motion on his crown. Donny pedaled off slowly at first, David sensing his indecisiveness at whether or not he should leave his younger brother for what seemed like could be David’s last moments before he died and became a ghost, a mummy, or some other undead ghoul who would form the basis of a new book in the *Goosebumps* series. Just to mess with him, and get him pedaling away faster, David wanted to tell Donny that his fate was already determined whether or not he stayed around to witness it,

and an imaginary shotgun with manmade sound effects was no choice weapon for bringing down the walking dead. Donny disappeared around the corner of the garage unit.

After another minute, David rose to his feet. He staggered in the direction of the apartment and paused at the end of the garage unit to glance around the corner for oncoming traffic. The way was clear. He crossed the parking lot, still nursing his sore head, which he anticipated would bruise purple like the color of his big toe when his mom accidentally slammed the front door on it and his toenail fell off in his sock after dangling as though on a hinge for a week and a half. His mom wanted to take David to the doctor when he was on the verge of losing his toenail, but his dad prevented the trip by threatening to make her pay the next month's rent if she shelled out any more on "impulsive" doctor's visits. Sometimes the lady next-door pounded on the drywall that her apartment shared with the Achilleus family when David and Donny's parents began to argue over money.

Although David and Donny had spent the majority of the afternoon reenacting *Terminator 2* outside on a day that reached ninety-two degrees Fahrenheit, he thought the back of his head felt abnormally moist with sweat as he stepped over a parking block on the edge of the yard. He took his hand away and when he looked at his palm he found that it was not covered in sweat like he expected, but that it was drenched with bright red blood.

"Mom! Donny killed me!" he said, as he took off with renewed energy towards the apartment. "I'm going to die! Donny killed me!"

He rushed through the front door and found his mom reading the cooking instructions on the back of a blue box of macaroni and cheese. The pasta boiled on the stove. When she saw her son burst into the room with tears streaming down his cheeks, she dropped her wooden mixing spoon and ran to him. Donny was nowhere to be seen in the kitchen or the living room, which

were adjoined as one room, the linoleum floor tile and counter space indicating the boundaries of the kitchen area. No doubt David's older brother was attempting to flee the judgment on his cold-blooded crime.

"What happened, David Achilles?" she said, stooping to his height. She wiped her glasses with the oblong frames, which were older than her children by at least ten years, and turned David around to view the cut on the back of his head. David held his blood-stained hand up for her to see Exhibit A in his brother's trial.

"I'm going to die," he said. "Tell the police that Donny killed me when we were playing outside."

"You're not going to die," his mom said. "It's just a cut. I'll wash it out in the bathtub." She sighed and took him by his clean hand to the bathroom at the end of the hallway beside the bedroom that Donny and David shared. The murderer was shut inside, perhaps leafing through an issue of *Sports Illustrated for Kids* or smashing the Hulk Hogan and "Macho Man" Randy Savage action figures together in their toy wrestling ring. For now, David didn't bother to heap guilt on his brother's head but knelt at the side of the bathtub and held his head under the faucet, awaiting his mom to squeeze out a dab of shampoo and lather his head under the water.

"What were you two doing out there that caused this?" she said.

"We were putting on a scene from *Terminator 2*," David said.

She sat on the edge of the bathtub and pushed David's head back from the faucet while the water heated up on her fingertips. When it reached the right temperature, she wetted his hair, and applied the cold shampoo to his scalp.

"I told your father not to let you guys watch violent movies like that," she said. "It makes you want to be the characters in them. Did he push you down or knock you into a wall?"

“No,” David said, his lips tasting of iron and soap, “he pretended to use his fist as a shotgun and I flung my head back into the brick wall on the backside of the garages. Mom, if Donny killed me, would he go to hell?”

“You’re not going to die from this, David. It’s a tiny cut.”

“But what if he killed me? Would God send him to hell?”

“Do you want your brother Donny to go to hell?”

“If it would put an end to him saying I can’t run fast because I’m fat.”

“You’re not fat,” his mom said. “The doctor said you were twenty pounds overweight for your age, but you’re a growing boy.” She rinsed the last of the shampoo out of his hair and turned the water off. As he waited for her to bring him a towel, David watched the water drip from the tips of his bangs into the diminishing pool of soap suds and blood-tinged water. She applied pressure to the cut with a wad of toilet paper before she began to dry his hair. David sat on the toilet lid once he had a hand towel draped over his head. He was left with instructions to press the toilet paper to his head underneath the towel.

Outside in the hall, his mom pounded on the brothers’ bedroom door, which was made of imitation wood like the rest of the doors in the apartment.

“Donny!” she said.

“What?” he said.

“Come out. I want to speak with you.”

“I can hear you through the door.”

“Come out, Mr. Achilles. I want you to see the condition your brother is in so that you can feel some sympathy towards him.”

Donny was brought into the doorway of the bathroom.

“He hit his own head on the wall,” he said. “I didn’t tell him he had to make it look so much like T-1000.”

“That’s not what I want to ask you about,” his mom said. “Did you call your brother fat? Did you say something about his weight again?”

“I told him he wasn’t as fast as me. I didn’t say anything specifically about his weight. He’s just being sensitivity.”

“Sensitive?”

“Yeah, that’s what I meant. Sensitive.”

“Am not sensitive!” David said from under the towel.

“David, stay out of this,” his mom said. “I’ll discipline your brother. You hold pressure to that cut.” She returned her attention to the brother under questioning. “Donny, if your brother is sensitive about something, you have to be sensitive about it, too. Please try. I don’t want one of you slaying the other over the gifts God gives you—whether you’re made a fast runner or whether you’re not. Haven’t I told you what happened to Cain and Abel in the Bible?”

“Yes, Mom,” Donny said.

“Alright, then,” she said. “Remember the lesson of Cain and Abel. It’s an ancient one, but you boys need to learn from it: Be content if you have grain and be content if you have livestock and fat. Don’t place your self-worth in the grain you can give and don’t place your self-worth in the livestock and fat you can give. God never stopped loving Cain, even though his grain was unpleasing.”

“David’s the one with all the fat to spare,” Donny said under his breath. “I know I’ll be giving the grain.”

“Hey, I heard that!” David said.

“David, quiet,” his mom said. “I’ll deal with him.” She shook her finger in Donny’s face. He flinched. “Donny, do you want the wooden spoon right on your bare backside? The Lord may teach us to be slow to anger, and to delight in mercy, but that doesn’t mean I won’t give you a paddling. Apologize right now for what you said.”

“Sorry, Mom,” Donny said.

“Apologize to David.”

“Sorry, David. You’re not fat. You’re a growing boy.”

His mom dropped her finger and stroked Donny’s hair.

“That’s better,” she said. “I’m going to have macaroni and cheese ready by five. Don’t go back outside. It’s a wonder one of you wasn’t taken away by strangers.”

“You’re not going to put tuna and peas in it, are you?” Donny said.

“I want tuna and peas,” David said.

“Hold pressure to that cut.” She turned back to Donny. “I’ll wait to put tuna and peas in it after I’ve dished out yours. Now, stay in your room until I call you out for dinner, okay?”

“Okay,” Donny said. He went back into the bedroom and closed the door.

“Dinner’s going to be ready at five,” David’s mom said and dropped to one knee beside the toilet. She took the towel from David’s head and removed the wad of toilet paper to peek at the cut. It hadn’t stopped bleeding, so she reapplied pressure. “Honey, I’m sorry that your brother teases you the way he does. Don’t worry about bickering with him when he does it, either. He’s only starving to see you lose your temper. Go lie down in bed until dinner, but don’t bicker with your brother.”

She went back to the kitchen to finish the macaroni and cheese. Pressing the toilet paper to his scalp, David entered the bedroom and sprawled himself across his bed without getting



under any of the sheets. Donny was rummaging through the plastic bin of action figures in the walk-in closet. Donny and David's twin beds were pushed together as one bed, Donny's manila sheets rising slightly higher than David's zoo animal sheets so that Donny, in effect, ended up with more rolling room since it was easier for a sleeper to roll from a higher place to a lower place than a lower place to a higher place.

David lay on his stomach with his head turned towards the bookshelf next to the window against the wall. The brothers kept semi-clear plastic bins containing Legos on the two bottom shelves and books on the two top shelves. Sandwiched between issues of *Sports Illustrated for Kids* and the brothers' collection of *Goosebumps* was a children's Bible called the NIV *Super Heroes Bible*. On the front cover was a cartoon drawing of a muscle-bound Moses raising his staff in the air to split the Red Sea. Confused fish with bulging eyes and eyebrows detached from their foreheads were hopping out of the water on either side of the Old Testament superhero. The caption underneath the cover illustration read, "The Quest for Good Over Evil." David walked across the room and grabbed the Bible from the shelf. He sat on the carpet with his legs crossed and began to leaf through the pages.

"Donny, do you know what 'Judgment Day' means?" he said.

"What?" his brother said. He stepped into the room with a handful of action figures.

"Didn't Dad say 'Judgment Day' comes from the Bible when we asked him about the full title of *Terminator 2*?"

"Check the Book of Reformation."

David ran his finger down the Table of Contents for "Reformation." He double-checked to be sure he wasn't overlooking it. If anyone knew about the Bible, it was David and Donny's dad. Before he met their mom, he was a missionary to Swaziland with Campus Crusade for

Christ International. Last April, he visited David's class wearing his T-shirt with the Swaziland flag pattern and gave a slideshow on his adventures in southern Africa. At recess, after they watched the slideshow, his classmates asked David if his dad wrestled lions. David said, no, the devil is a snake and you don't wrestle snakes, you pluck them up by the tail and crack them on the ground like a whip. His dad went to Africa to pluck the devil up by his tail and crack him on the ground like a whip. He and his classmates all agreed that being a missionary was as cool as being Dr. Alan Grant, the paleontologist from the movie *Jurassic Park*. Toys "R" Us sold an action figure of Dr. Alan Grant with a baby pterodactyl. David wondered if the toy stores would ever sell an action figure of his dad and, if they did, whether it would come with a snake or whether the toy companies would lie to everyone and say that David's dad wrestled lions while he lived in Africa. His mom said that people were always trying to take conversation about God and the devil out of society. David assumed that the toy companies played a part in this.

"There is no 'Reformation' in this Bible," David said. "Do you think it's got everything it's supposed to?"

Donny came across the room to sit beside his brother. He spilled his action figures over the floor. He had a Hulk Hogan in his black-and-white nWo uniform, a Bruce Wayne in street clothes wearing only a Batman mask and cape, and a Leonardo from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Original Movie* with rubber arms and legs and a torso-shell made out of hard plastic. All three action figures showed evidence that they had been chewed on at one point or another during their time in the Achilles household. They were all Donny's favorites, and Donny often liked to give his toys a taste test before he played with them.

"It sure looks thick enough to have everything," Donny said. "Let me check the Table of Contents."

David shoved the open book across the carpet. His brother scanned the list of books.

“I meant ‘Revelation,’ not ‘Reformation,’” he said. “It’s the last book.”

Donny opened to the last page of Revelation.

“Judgment Day comes at the end,” he said.

“Do you think this is going to give away the ending if we read it now?” David said. “I’ve never even been through the whole Book of Guinness, just what Mom read to us about Cain and Abel.”

“It won’t give anything away. The Bible isn’t one story. It’s a group of stories. They don’t always connect. Just relax and let me read to you—,” (he cleared his throat and settled on a passage towards the bottom with his index finger) “It says, ‘I am warning everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book. If you add anything to them, God will add to you the plagues told about in this book.’ See, you can’t add anything to the Bible or you’ll be judged. People who have added things to the Bible will be judged on Judgment Day. Those who haven’t added things won’t be judged.”

“How do you know by ‘this book’ he’s talking about the whole Bible?” David said. “Maybe he’s talking about the Book of Revelation only. I thought you said the books of the Bible didn’t connect.”

“I didn’t say they *always* didn’t connect. Sometimes they do. This is one of those times when they do.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s obvious, David. Don’t you think God wants us to read the whole Bible?”

“I guess,” David said.

“So, why would he judge us just based on adding things to the Book of Revelation if he wants us to read the whole Bible?” Donny said.

David nodded in understanding. The two brothers were quiet for a minute. Donny collected his action figures from the floor and started back towards the closet. David read over the rest of the passage to the end of the book. He could tell the kids at school that he knew how the Bible ended. Maybe he would put it in the next story he read publically and never tell them how he found out the conclusion, that he didn’t take the time to read the entire book cover to cover, but only half of the last page. They would think he was smarter than the kids who rode a special bus away from school to be in the enrichment program. They would think he should be put in the enrichment program based on his advanced reading level.

David closed the *Super Heroes Bible* and put it back on the top shelf between the magazines and children’s novels. In the nuclear explosion scene of *Terminator 2*, a flash of light in the sky turns a playground full of unsuspecting kids into crouching statues of ash as they play on swings, seesaws, and rocking horses that are planted into the ground on coiled springs. The winds from the blast sweep flames over the earth, obliterate nearby buildings to reveal their skeletal frameworks, and lift cars and city buses off the roadways as though they were encountering zero gravity at the flick of a light switch. By the end of the scene, the only person who isn’t scattered through the air as flakes of post-cookout charcoal is left as a skeleton clinging to a chain link fence. David imagined that if he ever experienced God’s Judgment Day for himself, it would feel like being that skeleton clinging to the fence. He never wanted to face it.

Before he got back in bed to apply pressure to the cut on his head until dinnertime, David knelt by his bed and attempted to pray. He closed his eyes as tightly as he could and tried to imagine God at the other end of a telephone wire that was strung from his bedroom upwards

across over a million telephone poles until it reached heaven's gates. For some reason, God wasn't upgraded to a cell phone. Maybe they hadn't caught on yet in heaven.

"God, don't ever let me add anything to your book," he said. "I don't want to become a skeleton like the one in *Terminator 2*. And forgive Donny for letting me smack my head against the wall. He wasn't firing a real gun, so he doesn't deserve to go to hell, I guess. And also, bring Mom and Dad more money for the rent. I hate hearing the lady next-door pound on the drywall."

He paused and listened for a response, but if God picked up the telephone in heaven, David didn't hear his response. He took that he didn't hear a dial tone in his head as a positive sign, because it meant that he at least didn't dial a wrong number. He opened his eyes and climbed into bed on top of the sheets. Through the window screen, the roar of the landscaper mowing the grass thundered over any other noise on Crownwood Drive.

### Energy Drink Bandits

As Bruce Bartholomew emptied a twenty-ounce Dr. Pepper, his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat as though against a current. A strand of saliva draped from the outer rim of the plastic bottle to his lower lip as he took the bottle from his mouth. He used his finger like a wiper blade over his mouth. The taste of hotdog and pickle relish came up with a stifled belch.

Outside in the fading sunlight, under the lights of the parking shelter, a silver Volkswagen Passat with a dented and chrome rims that spun like miniature windmills pulled up to the Marathon gas pump marked with a number two. Three weeks earlier, when Bruce's son, Ronny, was practicing for the maneuverability portion of his driving test in a Wal-Mart parking lot, he backed into a light pole and left identical damage to his mom's Cobalt. The repair cost was four hundred dollars. Bruce footed the bill for his ex-wife because she told him it was almost a week's worth of wages for her at the Shake Shoppe. She was trying to save up for Ronny's

college. How she ever expected to do that without Ronny scoring a 2400 on his SAT, or bulking up fifty pounds to play varsity linebacker—well, it was some mystery, some mystery.

The driver of the Passat got out, stretched, and unscrewed his gas cap. After he set it on the roof and pulled out one of the nozzles, he selected the Pay-at-the-Pump option on the keypad, swiping either a credit or debit card from his wallet. With his back turned to Bruce's convenience store, he began to pump gas. His black hair was the same shade as the tinted windows on his car and was shaved into a buzzcut. It was hard to tell under the lights whether his skin complexion was more like one of the Mexicans who worked at the Family Dollar in town or like a tan Caucasian who spent the weekend waterskiing on the Ohio River. If the man was Hispanic, then Bruce knew he had a couple of stupid criminals on his hands who were called the "Energy Drink Bandits" by the six o'clock news. Chrome rims, tinted windows: yup, sure seemed like stupid criminals. Leave it to people who need a getaway car to drive something that could be identified even by a high school student who only knew cars from Auto Trader magazine.

Seated on a four-legged stool beside Bruce, Ronny Bartholomew removed the lid from his Styrofoam cup labeled with a Folgers logo. He inhaled and blew. The checkout counter was littered with emptied packets of sugar substitute and a crumpled cup of French Vanilla creamer. With his breath, Ronny pushed loose crystals of sugar substitute over the edge and onto the floor. Bruce got up to pee.

"When are you going to take the driving test?" he asked his son.

Leaning forward on his stool to take a sip, Ronny jolted his head away from the cup on the counter as the coffee scalded his lip. He wiped his mouth on his wrist. It left a streak in his blond arm hairs.

“Mom says I need more practice,” Ronny said.

“Bull, she’ll have you waiting ’til you’re eighteen.”

Ronny slid his cup in front of the barcode scanner and cleared the counter of the empty sugar packets and the creamer cup. He dumped them in the wastebasket under the cash register. The scanner’s red laser disappeared from the cup when it didn’t sense a barcode.

“When do you think I should take it?” Ronny said.

“How ’bout tomorrow morning? DMV open Saturdays?” Bruce said.

“Don’t you gotta work?”

“I can get someone else to watch the place while I’m gone. No biggie. You’ve practiced this week, right?”

“Mom went out driving with me after school today.”

“Practice cones?”

“Yeah.”

“How’d ya do?” Bruce said.

“Ran one over,” Ronny said.

“Failed again?”

“You can’t run any over.”

Bruce’s upper body shook as he chuckled and clapped his son on his shoulder blade, bony and like a slab of slate.

“At least you and her didn’t wreck this time.”

“Nope.”

“I’ll take ya in the morning. Is there a fee if you fail?”

“I don’t think so.”



“I’ll take ya in the morning. I’ve gotta piss.” He pointed through the window at the dark-complexioned man pumping gas. “Keep an eye on that Volkswagen. I wish I didn’t have to leave you alone.” Clutching his abdomen, he writhed and began to stamp his feet.

Ronny looked through the window.

“Do you think he’s gonna try to pump and run?” he said.

“He’s Pay-at-the-Pump, but watch for the passenger. I think they might be trying to pull one over on us small business folk. Don’t let them leave without paying for any drinks. I’ll probably be back before they can give you any trouble.”

Ronny nodded and picked up the Folgers cup with both hands, as though he were bringing a scented candle to his nose. He sniffed the sloshing liquid, applying enough caution so that he wouldn’t have even snuffed out an imaginary flame the size of a teardrop.

“Haven’t you ever drunk a cup of coffee before?” Bruce asked. “You sniff it the way a canine sniffs for weed in a locker.”

“Go piss,” Ronny said.

“If you’re going to drink it, then drink it. Don’t call in the narcs.”

Bruce chuckled at his own joke.

“Go piss,” Ronny said.

Bruce moved to the back of the store, still chuckling. As he glanced at the display coolers—stocked with energy drinks, purified water, twenty-ouncers of pop, and half gallons of milk—he sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. With the Passat outside, they became as prized as any Rolexes inside a glass case. The local news reports, which Bruce remembered in snippets, called the Energy Drink Bandits “at-large, and potentially dangerous.” For the last three weeks in August, they were a “menace to local grocers and gas station owners throughout Appalachian

Ohio,” walking out of stores with “trunkloads of Red Bull, Monster, and Rockstar Energy Drinks.” Although the “pattern of crime indicated amateurs.” (Bruce pictured a carful of teenagers after a caffeine fix), police authorities were “hesitant initially to rule out more experienced culprits.” (Like maybe kleptomaniacs who swiped everything from energy drinks to car systems to five-cent pieces of bubble gum.) “Video surveillance footage and eyewitness accounts” showed that the bandits were “two in number,” and that they were not teenagers but adults, and “likely members of the greater Gallipolis area.” One, the driver, was a “Hispanic male believed to be in his mid to late twenties, to stand between six-foot-two and six-foot-three, and to weigh between two hundred seventy-five and three hundred pounds.” The other, the one who did the dirty work, was a “middle-aged Caucasian male standing at five-eleven and weighing between two hundred twenty and two hundred thirty pounds.” During each heist, he disguised himself as a representative for one of the energy drink companies. His job, he claimed at each store, was to replace “expired” cans with new ones. The new cans, however, “never arrived as promised.”

At the back of the store, the door to the men’s room stood ajar. Bruce nudged it open so that the handle bounced off the rubber doorstop on the wall. He caught the door on the ricochet, shut himself inside, and flipped on the light. The energy-saving bulb in the middle of the ceiling was coiled in the shape of a spring and was missing the glass globe that used to encase it. Under its sixty-watts of light, the burnt orange floor tiles were streaked with black footprints from Bruce’s workboots and Ronny’s pair of Nike tennis shoes. A swoosh pointed towards the wall on either side of the urinal. He placed one of his Wolverines on each of the swooshes and unzipped his fly. His pee slapped the pink urinal cake and foamed, as the humid air filled with the aroma

of freshly picked cherries. He flushed, and the electronic doorbell (the *dings* and *dongs* muffled through the wall) went off at the front of the store.

“Bienvenidos a los Energy Drink Bandits,” Bruce said under his breath. He pictured the first chapter of the intermediate level Spanish workbook that Ronny brought home from school on the weekends and laid on the dining room table until Sunday nights when he started his homework. Sometimes Bruce flipped open the book and studied the review words at the beginning of each chapter because he hoped to better communicate with the Hispanic customers who came into his store. “Bienvenidos” was the first review word in the opening chapter.

The urinal cake was taken up in the surge at the bottom of the tank. A drop of the icy toilet water splashed his pinky. He stepped over to the paper towel dispenser mounted next to the sink and slid his fingers inside the slot. The dispenser was out of towels. He squeezed a gob of antibacterial soap into his hand and lathered it into suds under the stream of water that flowed from the motion-sensing facet. In the mirror, his pupils dilated inside a pair of powder blue rims. His ex-wife said his eyes were the feature that drew her to him in the beginning. The stock women can put in something as unimportant as eyes. It reminded him of the Venus and Mars saying. Ronny had the same eyes. They probably haunted her when she had their son on the weekdays. And it served her right, divorcing Bruce Ronald Bartholomew.

In place of paper towels, he shook off drops of water over the sink and wiped his hands on the lap of his denim Wranglers. Once outside of the restroom, an open beverage cooler drew his attention to the far end of the store as he strode towards the counter. The customer who held the cooler door open was hidden out of view by the rows of metal shelves stocked with bags of Doritos, packs of sunflower seeds, and packets of Slim Jims that stood six inches out of their

open boxes. He was probably hunched over on purpose. His nerves were getting to him. He probably knew his face was on the news.

Bruce nudged Ronny, who, after nearly tipping over on his stool, caught his balance on the counter ledge and looked up. His blue eyes were round saucers in his head. Veins streaked his retinas. Venus and Mars.

“Falling asleep on me?” Bruce said.

“The passenger came in,” Ronny said.

“The men’s bathroom is out of paper towels.” Bruce pulled out the set of keys to the storage room. “Refill it and check the ladies’ room, too.”

“Are you gonna call the cops?”

“You could also run a mop over the floors.”

“Are you going to call the cops, Dad?”

“Let them walk out with it first. We don’t need a confrontation. I’ll copy down the license plate number and call 9-1-1 before they drive off in that Volkswagen. It shouldn’t be too hard for the cops to track down a car like that without us playing vigilantes. I’m surprised they didn’t do it sooner.”

Ronny grinned as he snatched the lanyard by a plastic keychain in the shape of a piggy bank. The name of Bruce’s bank was once written on the side of the keychain but now was rubbed off except for the letters NK.

“Let’s see ’em pull one over on us small business folk,” Ronny said. He gave his dad a playful jab on the shoulder and headed towards the storage room, swinging the lanyard around his middle and index fingers.

Bruce pressed the FEED button on the cash register's receipt printer and tore off a blank strip of paper along the printer's teeth. With the Bic pen that he kept on the counter for customers who paid with credit cards or checks, he stepped outside the door and peered at the Passat's Galia County license plate. The sequence of letters and numbers stamped on the Ohio the Beautiful background was EFB 2387. His palm was the hardest surface he could find to write on besides the brick wall and he didn't want to poke holes through the flimsy receipt paper. The numbers and letters came out looking the way they would had they been written on his mouse pad at home when he tried to copy down information from the Internet in a hurry and didn't look first to see where he was setting the paper.

As he came back inside, he picked up a USA Today from the newspaper rack and folded it open behind the counter. The Money section showed the Dow Jones losing twenty-five points. The NASDAQ lost nine. Over the edge of his paper, he saw the cooler door close and he got out his cell phone. It was turned off so he waited for it to power up and enter into service area. One bar, two, three, two again. Practically a dead zone. As he pressed a nine and the first one for the emergency dispatcher, the doorbell went off again, this time its *dings* and *dongs* heard clearly. The man from the gas pump walked through the doors. He wasn't a water-skier. His skin tone was like the Mexicans who worked at the Family Dollar and pushed their kids in strollers along the docks on the weekends and let their toddlers go fishing from the shore with kiddy poles. No doubt, an Energy Drink Bandit. It wasn't reported on the news—or at least, Bruce didn't remember—whether or not both bandits ever came inside to execute a heist. Bruce must have been witnessing them about to snap. Maybe the Hispanic was coming in to tell the other to bail.

The sleeves of his gray T-shirt were the length of jersey sleeves and ended halfway down his pudgy forearms. He didn't look taller than six-foot and was at least two hundred fifty pounds,

though three hundred, or even two seventy-five, seemed generous. But news reporters were always missing facts here and there, or at least exaggerating them. Bruce thought about his ex-wife stepping off the scales at home years ago, the numbers swinging between two ninety-five, the highest number, and five, the lowest, and finally stopping at zero to align with the red tick mark on the screen. She took the scales with her when she moved out and Bruce never bought a new one. Of all the things to take, why the scales? Sometimes he peeked at her weight before the numbers scrambled and reset. Before she started to put on a potbelly from working at the Shake Shoppe, she was half the weight of a man who weighed two hundred fifty pounds. One hundred twenty-five. Now she was probably verging on one-fifty, and if she ever reached two-fifty, it'd serve her right. She never had to work a day in her life or survive off fast food when she was married to Bruce.

While his gaze was fixed on the Hispanic man in the gray T-shirt, a squat Hispanic woman with her hair braided into a pony tail set a half-gallon of two percent milk on the checkout counter. Beads of condensation rolled down the jug and splashed into small pools on the shielded placemat that said, "We I.D." A scar gave the impression that she had a permanent bag under one of her eyelids. She was no taller than five-two. Bruce shut his phone.

"Just the milk?" he said. He checked the back of the store. The cooler door was no longer open.

"Sí," she said, smiling. One of her front teeth protruded farther than the other and was chipped without a cap. She said something to the Hispanic man in Spanish, who had come up behind her, browsing the candy bars in front of the register and rubbing her back. He spotted a king-sized Snickers and placed it on the counter.

"Compras leche?" He asked the woman. She nodded.

“No tenemos two percent en la casa, only skim.” She stuck out her tongue, as though the skim milk she imagined tasting at home was expired. The man looked from her and then to Bruce and then through the window at the highway, and just beyond that the river, which was barely visible through the darkened row of trees.

“How much is it with the candy bar?” the woman said, getting Bruce’s attention back on her.

“Let’s, uh, find out,” he said as he scanned the milk and the Snickers. Under the counter, he balled the receipt paper with his other hand and dropped it into the wastebasket against his leg. He read the price on the register’s monitor. “Three-thirty-three.”

The woman brought out a change purse with a stack of dollar bills folded in half with a metallic money clip. She leafed through the twenties, tens, and fives on the outside and brought out four ones. Bruce took them and counted out change from the drawer. The man tore his candy bar open and bit off a chunk from the end. A string of caramel clung to his stubbly chin. After wiping it off, he licked the tip of his finger. The woman grabbed her milk and the couple turned to leave.

“Hold on,” Bruce said before they were through the doors. “You don’t happen to have a brother—maybe un amigo—who borrows your car from time to time, do you? Maybe goes for joy rides?”

“Un amigo?” the Hispanic man said back.

“Sí, un amigo.”

The man bit another chunk from his candy bar and thought about the question. Bruce glanced at the wadded receipt in the wastebasket. It was on the top next to his empty bottle of Dr. Pepper if he needed to dig it out again.

“It’s our car, señor,” the man said. “No one else drives it.”

“None of your friends ever take it out for spins? Joy rides?”

“We let no one else drive it. Why do you want to know? Are you trying to find someone who stole gas from you?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s just a report I saw on the news. It’s, uh, nothing. A different Passat. Lo siento.” Bruce coughed and looked out the window. The man smiled and nodded.

“No offense, señor. I hope you get the right Passat. It’s a dangerous world we live in, even en las villas y las escuelas. My family and I came here from Mexico. There are people there who would slit my wife’s throat.” He ran his thumb through his neck to give the impression of a throat being slit, all the while smiling.

“Lo siento,” Bruce said. He coughed again.

The Hispanic man held up his candy bar in farewell. Bruce waved back the way he would have batted a cobweb out of his face. The couple went out to their car.

A few minutes later, after they had driven off, Ronny wheeled a mop bucket from the bathroom.

“Might as well get the rest of the floors before we dump it,” he said. “What happened with that woman? Did you bust her?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you saw a little Mexican woman come in?” Bruce said, holding his hand out to his side in the vicinity of his ribcage to indicate her height.

“Weren’t you after a Mexican?”

“One Mexican. The other guy was a Caucasian, though. They’re called the Energy Drink Bandits. They dress up like they’re working for the energy drink companies and then they steal trunkloads of—ah, forget it. Don’t you ever watch the news?”



“Mom takes me out driving as soon as I get home from school. When do I have time to watch the news?”

“You should make a point of it. Why isn’t she teaching you that?”

“At least I’m not the one who had the wrong Mexican. They’re not all mobsters, Dad. You should read up on their culture if you want to do a better business off of them. How about I loan you my workbook from Spanish class?”

“Mop the floors. I probably read more of that workbook than you do and can probably speak more Spanish.”

Ronny lifted the mop out of the bucket and wrung out the mop water. It was the color of the Ohio River. A smirk came across his face as he swept the mop over the floor tiles.

“Did you get that license plate number?” he said.

“I don’t wanna hear a word out of you until you pass that driving test,” Bruce said.

“The cops will probably make you an honorary deputy for taking down that woman. She looked like the next leader of the Mexican Mafia.”

“You sound so smart taking cheap shots at me, Ronny. Why aren’t you smart enough to pass your driving test, or at least not back into a light pole?”

Ronny swept the mop over the floor. The wet tiles glistened the way the scales of a catfish glisten under the sun once it’s reeled in and is flopping out the last moments of its life on the rotted floorboards of a motorboat. Bruce stared through the window at the darkened row of trees. A vehicle passed on the highway, only its tail lights and the dim outline of a truck bed in the fading sunlight showing it to be a pick-up. The Passat pulled out of the parking lot after it. He stuffed the garbage down with his boot under the counter and pulled the orange drawstring on the trash liner, tying it into a bow. As he passed his son on the way outside to the dumpster, he gave

him a shove on the back, almost knocking him over. His Wolverines left a trail of footprints on the slick tiles.

### Ohio State Route 56

Guy had to be crazy hitchhiking along fifty-six. The first time I saw him he was coming out of Five Points stepping with his Reebok hi-tops one in front of the other like he was tight roping the white boundary line of the road. I didn't stop for the maniac then because he didn't even look around at me until I had already swerved into the other lane to miss him. He stuck his thumb out to the car that was riding my rear, but there was no bite. Once I got a clear look at his face in the side view mirror, I was sure I knew him. Wes Addle. Guy used to play all buddy-buddy to me on the school bus back when I was in the seventh grade and he was a sophomore in high school because he didn't have no one his own age or even a grade below him who would sit beside him because he'd pester you relentlessly until you played a round of bloody knuckles. You bet I got in my rounds by the end of the year. I could barely even do my homework in Pre-Algebra every night because it felt worse than arthritis and carpal tunnel combined.

I pulled off fifty-six into the gravel driveway of a farmhouse with black trash bags and cardboard boxes that said “Florida Oranges” set out on the edge of the yard for pickup. I let the other car go by; then, I turned back for Wes. Someone had to. Wasn’t like he was going to murder anyone, though I was sure he gave off that impression to just about everyone who saw him hitchhiking on a two-lane country road where the speed limit was fifty-five but almost no one did under eighty unless there was a cop out.

The second time around, Wes was doing the tightrope walker act on the guardrail with his arms spread out to his sides for balance. Maniac also carried a red gym bag with a three-stripped Adidas, but not in the arm over the road like you might expect, but in the arm that was over the little creek that ran under the bridge. I swear, it was like he wanted to tip over. When he saw me come to a stop on the opposite side of the road along the guardrail, he held out his thumb, as though he were not making it terribly blatant enough already that he was a hitchhiker, and dropped to the pavement. With the first sign of caution he’d shown towards getting hit since I’d been observing him, he waited on the boundary line to check for traffic before he crossed to the other side of the road. I pulled my gear shift into park and rolled down the window.

“How far you going?” he said. I turned down the volume on my radio, which was playing a commercial for a Circleville car dealership. Wes lifted his white A-shirt over his belly and wiped beads of sweat off his forehead. The words “R.I.P. Michelle 3-9-09” were tattooed on his stomach over a black cross.

“Michelle Addle, right?” I said. As soon as I said it, though, I didn’t know why I was getting caught up on the tattoo. He wasn’t even in the car yet.

“Huh?” he said.

“Your tattoo. Michelle is Michelle Addle, right? For some reason, I never even associated her with you. Makes sense, though, once I think about the last name. What was she to you? Your sister?”

He shielded his eyes from the sun and squinted at me.

“Do I know you from somewhere, man?” he said.

“You might remember me,” I said. “David Achilleus. We rode the bus together a while back.” As soon as I said my name, his eyes bulged about as wide as like Jimmy Stewart’s in his close-up shot towards the end of *It’s a Wonderful Life* when he’s about to flip out because his own mother won’t let him into her boarding home.

“Well, I’ll be, if it isn’t Lil’ Davy,” he said. I cringed at the name because it brought back some of the absolute fondest memories of my seventh grade year, I’ll assure you. “Listen, could we save the chitchat for inside the car? Trust me, man, about the last thing I need is to get picked up by a cop for hitchhiking. How far you going?”

“Into Sterling.”

“I live off Main Street in one of them houses across from the old pool. I’ll show you once we’re in town. Could you unlock the back?”

I hit the button for the automatic locks, and Wes threw his gym bag on the seat next to my book bag and a white poster board I had to bring home to work on my American Gov presentation on the Manhattan Project. I wasn’t usually a hothead, but earlier that day during Mr. Mueller’s seventh period Gov class, I nearly got sent to the vice principal’s office because the guy who sat behind me in class thought it would be a kick to twirl a No. 2 pencil in my ear after he coated the lead in saliva with the same tongue on which he caught probably every STI except gonorrhea. The idea of my senior year being six weeks from its conclusion almost made me bold

enough to turn around and clock the guy in his jaw for attempting to impair my hearing with a viral infection. We were semi good friends, me and the other guy, so he might not have taken the brawl to heart. His weight advantage on me by about twenty pounds was probably the only thought that deterred me from plunging head first into the first out-of-school suspension of my academic career. So, instead we made peace with a shoving match, followed by a brief verbal exchange of f-bombs. You know, typical gentleman's way of arriving at an armistice.

Before Wes shut the door, he dug through the gym bag until he found a pack of Marlboros, a deli sandwich in saran wrap and a can of Coke. He zipped up the bag and came around the front of the car to the passenger's seat. He buckled his seatbelt, and I took the car out of park and made a U-turn to head towards Mt. Sterling again. We were five miles out of town, five or six from the high school.

"I remember Michelle semi well," I said, rolling up the window. I pressed the button for the A/C and turned the fan up to the highest setting because my pits were drenched with about enough salt water to fill a small aquarium for exotic fish. "She died in a head-on crash up near the seventy-one ramp, didn't she?"

"Why do you care about bringing her up?" Wes said. He placed his can of Coke in the cup holder between the two seats and slid his sandwich and pack of cigarettes into the glove box on top of the clear plastic envelope that held my parents' registration papers and proof of insurance. "You got no other go-to topic of conversation?"

"Just on my mind because of your tattoo," I said.

"Well, get it off your mind, okay? Because I don't feel like saying much about her. Not much more to say, you know? You get to a point of closure, and the last thing you want is some *people* who hardly know you to keep bringing it up."

“All right, all right. I’ll quit talking about her.” Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him looking me over. I wiggled the vent between blowing cold air on me and blowing it on the gym bag and book bag and the poster board on the backseat. I ended with it blowing cold air on me.

“Good. You better. Because I like *you*, Lil’ Davy, don’t get me wrong. But I don’t like people who pry. So, you shouldn’t become one of those people who pry.”

I nodded along as though, at the mention of my former emcee name, I’d just reverted back to the seventh-grader who was given purple nurples until he shared with the entire school bus his ability to rap all the lyrics to Eminem’s “The Real Slim Shady” from memory.

“I will cut you some slack for mentioning her, though,” he said. “She was an angel and a nymph. She’d entice a man even if he went down to Hades with a lyre. You know what a lyre is?”

“Like a guitar, right?” I said.

“No, man, you’re way off. It’s more like a harp. I read about it in a play once before I dropped out of school. Orpheus played it for his dead wife, trying to bring her back from the underworld.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, God’s probably got Michelle up in heaven with King David plucking a harp,” Wes said. “She was nothing like me. Only part of me that’s holy is the piece of flesh with her name on it.”

“Were you and Michelle brother and sister by marriage or by blood?” I said. “You didn’t look alike.”

“Say, Lil’ Davy, that’s a remarkable observation you just made. I hope you recorded that one in your biology journal. This is the kind of Captain Obvious discovery that makes it into science journals. What gave it away that we didn’t look alike? Was it the fact that she was half-Asian?”

“Was she half-Asian? Never looked like it to me.”

“Heck, you must have been too stricken with shyness to ever look into her slanty eyes. She was half-Korean. Doesn’t matter that we had different parents, though. Me and Michelle were *real* brother and sister, even if our birth certificates didn’t reflect it. Her mom is my step-mom, but Dad got divorced from my real mom so early I don’t even remember her. Now, she’s a drug addict out in California.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Shoot, don’t be. I just care about meeting up with my sister anymore. I’ll see Michelle in heaven if I ever make it there.”

I steered around a curve at forty-five miles per hour. Wes pulled down the overhead visor and looked at his reflection in the mirror. He licked his fingers and combed them through his bleached blond hair. A tuft of hair on the top of his head stood up like a clump of crab grass. It wouldn’t have gone down with ten buckets of saliva.

“Are you coming from school?” he said, closing the visor.

I said I was.

“What year are you in school now?” he said.

“Senior,” I said.

“I saw you passing me once, didn’t I?”

“Huh?”



“On the road. Back when I was starting down the hill towards the bridge. Didn’t you pass me and come back? Because you were going back towards the school when you picked me up.”

“I didn’t recognize you from the back,” I said. “And there was a car. I didn’t have room to brake.”

“Brotherly of you to come back,” he said.

“Brotherly?”

“No one ever uses that word. Brotherly.”

He felt over his pockets and found a Bic lighter with a Cleveland Indians logo. He flicked the lighter several times and cupped his hand over it like he was warming it. The flame stopped burning when he released the button. He opened the glove box.

“You mind if I ate or smoked in here, *brother*?” he said, holding up the deli sandwich and Marlboros in one hand in a bundle.

“Eating’s fine, but I got the air on,” I said. “Watch your crumbs.”

He tossed the Marlboros back into the glove box. Several of them spilled out of the pack and rolled onto the rubber floor mat.

“Five, six, pick up sticks,” he said as he gathered them back into the pack and latched the glove box shut with a click. He peeled the sandwich open and spread the saran wrap on his lap as a placemat. Using his finger like a butter knife, he wiped the mayonnaise off the top slice of bread and smeared it onto the saran wrap. He squeezed the sandwich together to make the bread as thin as notebook paper.

“Since we’re brothers, I guess I can let you in on a secret,” he said, taking his first bite. His gums smacked together as he chewed. Bread crumbs pattered his placemat like snowflakes, a handful of them sticking in the streak of mayonnaise.

“What’s that?” I said.

“I’m a jailbird.”

“Is that where you’re coming from? County?”

He hesitated to answer as he took another bite of his sandwich. Once he finished chewing, he pulled the tab halfway on his can of Coke. It spouted fizz from the opening, and before he pulled the tab the rest of the way, he sucked it dry the way he would the venom out of a snake bite.

“Can you believe it?” he said. “They had me locked up in county for thirty days.”

“What for?” I said.

He took three gulps of his Coke.

“Do you really want to know?” he said, setting the can back in the cup holder.

“Sure,” I said.

“I bludgeoned a guy who picked me up after my first stint in jail.”

“Cut the crap. What’d you really do?”

He slapped his knee in a fit of laughter. Once he calmed down, I heard his gums smacking together as he chewed another bite of his sandwich.

“I got pinned with a class-IV misdemeanor because my aunt said I was ‘threatening her physical harm,’” he said, swallowing. “It was a domestic violence charge.”

“What’d you say to her?” I said. “Do you care if I know?”

He paused to wash down his food with another swig of his Coke. He seemed to take on the demeanor of a guest on a late night television show discussing his role in a recent film project. I was his David Letterman and Paul Schaefer. He wiped his mouth.

“I told her one afternoon that I was going to break down her bedroom door with a sledge hammer,” he said.

“Why’d you say that?” I said.

“I was in pain from getting my wisdom teeth pulled. Why else would I say a thing like that? Do you think I hate my aunt?”

“I don’t know. Do you?”

“I don’t hate anyone, David. Everyone’s my brother or my sister. Don’t you know that? Aren’t you my brother?”

“Sure. We’re brothers.”

“Besides, it’s not like I told her I was going to do any harm to her. That’s just what she *implied*—or wait, is it implied or inferred? Do you know any grammar?”

“Inferred.”

“Really? How come?”

“When you say something, you imply. When you hear something, you infer. Your aunt heard.”

“Okay then, it makes sense. You’re the college bound kid. Aren’t you a college bound kid? I saw your poster board in the backseat. I bet you work hard in school, get straight A’s.”

“I don’t get straight A’s,” I said.

“Are you going to college?” he said.

“I’m going to state next year.”

“Then, I’m glad I asked you. I’m glad I got a ride with a college bound kid who can teach me about grammar. Anyway, it’s like I was saying—” He chomped into his sandwich. “It’s like I was saying,” he started again, his mouth full of food, “my aunt *inferred* that I was threatening her

physical harm when I said I was going to take a sledge hammer to her door, but I never said I was going to take the sledge hammer to her once I was inside. Do you see how my words got distorted?”

“I guess I can see,” I said.

“I wasn’t threatening her with physical harm at all. I’ve learned I have to be careful with my words. Do you see why grammar is so important in life? One word is the difference between saying ‘I’m going to take a sledge hammer to her’ and ‘I’m going to take a sledge hammer to *her door*.’”

“I guess. It still doesn’t make sense, though.”

“What?” he said.

“Is that all you had to do to your aunt to make them lock you up for thirty days? Seems harsh.”

“That’s all I did to her this time, yeah. But she’s had it out for me for years. This wasn’t the first time she called the cops on me—once she did it because I pushed her into a coffee table and she tripped over the leg. The old woman said it left a bruise on her thigh. A *bruise*. Can you believe she would call the cops over something so trivial? She doesn’t like that I’m still living with Dad. That’s why she has it out for me. But heck, she’s living with Dad, too. Do you see the way she’s being a hypocrite?”

“What’s jail like?” I said, wanting to change the topic. I could tell he was getting worked up over his aunt. I knew it because he was getting a creak in his voice. He got worked up on the bus sometimes, too. His voice always got the creak in it. One time he got so worked up that he made the bus driver pull over between stops and yell the d-word in front of all the younger kids, which caused them to giggle. It all started when Wes threw a folder out of the window and

caused the car behind us to pull off the road. One of the other high schools guys called Wes a lunatic, and Wes got into the aisle and held his arms up like he was ready to throttle him. Squatted in his boxing stance, he looked like the leprechaun mascot for the Notre Dame Fighting Irish. I hoped he wasn't going to see his aunt when he got home. He probably wouldn't be home for more than a day before he ended up in county again.

"County's not really that bad," Wes said.

"No?" I said.

"The only thing that killed me was the food."

"Oh yeah?"

"It's sorta like fast food," he said. "Except I would practically run a mile for Mickey D's or BK now. The first thing I did when I was out was I stopped at a Sunoco station for this deli sandwich and Coke." He lifted the half-eaten sandwich into the air as though he were a kindergartener in show-and-tell.

"What about sleeping on a stone hard mattress?" I said. "I bet you hated that. If I ever went to jail, I think I'd pop an Advil every day for my back pains."

"Nah, man, the mattresses weren't so bad. I didn't get any back pains. Then again, I'm used to sleeping inside a sleeping bag at home on the living room floor. When my aunt moved in with us, she took over the bedroom. See? That's why I told her I was going to take a sledge hammer to the door—it's really *my room*."

"I see." He beat two fingers against his chest for emphasis. I didn't want him to get worked up. His aunt made him boil. "Advil's more my thing."

For the next thirty seconds or so, we drove on in silence except for the sound of Wes's gums smacking together on his deli sandwich and him slurping on his Coke. I turned up the radio, but

it was playing a song by Britney Spears. I was never big into Britney Spears, even when I was young enough for pop music and boy bands like Nsync and The Backstreet Boys. I shut the radio off. After gulping down a mouthful of Coke, Wes slurped the liquid in the rim of the can and snickered.

“What’s so funny?” I said.

“Is that her album?” he said.

“Just the radio.”

“Sure. I bet you downloaded her album and now you don’t want me to find out how much you like it.”

“I’m not a Britney Spears fan.”

“Sure.”

Wes shoved the last bite of his sandwich into his mouth and wadded up his syran wrap placemat. He held down the button on his automatic window and tossed the ball of plastic into a field of ripening soybeans. I was about to yell at him for littering because at first glance the car approaching us appeared to be a white police SUV, and I didn’t want to get nailed with a five hundred dollar fine. The closer the car came, however, I was able to see that there were no siren lights on the roof and that it was actually a GMC and the driver was a woman who looked like she was in her sixties. I let it go. I wiggled the air-conditioning vent back and forth between me and the backseat.

“You wouldn’t last a day listening to Britney Spears in county,” Wes said, once the window was up again and the wind had quieted down again in our ears. When it was rolled down, the beating on my ear drums was like the blades of a helicopter. I didn’t answer. I knew he was trying to get under my skin. In his eyes, I was still the seventh-grader who saved him a seat

on the bus because I didn't want him to sit behind me, swoop down on me, and claw at the scabs he'd made on my knuckles the day before.

"The first day I was in county I had to box a guy for the toilet," he said. "Your Brittney Spears music doesn't teach you how to box, does it? You wouldn't last a single day in county. Your bowels would explode."

We came up behind a red pickup truck with the word Chevrolet written across the door of the tailgate inside a gray stripe. It was hauling a riding mower and planks of lumber on a flatbed trailer. They were clamped down with straps made out of seatbelt material and the blue tarp over the lumber was big with wind and flapped like a threadbare flag on the verge of being retired by the American Legion. I switched on my blinker to pass. The speedometer got up to seventy as I accelerated ahead of the truck.

"Giddy up, Wyatt," Wes said. He howled and yee-hawed. "How much kick does thing have?"

I eased off the accelerator and slowed down to sixty once I was back in the right-hand lane.

"Not much," I said.

"We got a few miles 'til we're in town. Why don't we find out?"

"I'd rather not."

"C'mon." He leaned forward in his seat and gripped the dashboard, his reigns, with both of his hands. Senior year, sure. But I didn't feel like shelling out money for a speeding ticket. His sun burnt knuckles turned white except for the freckles.

"The cops are out," I said.

"No they ain't," he said. "Foot it."

“I’m telling you, the cops are out.”

“I said, ‘Foot it.’” He formed his pointer and middle finger into the barrel of a handgun and his thumb into the hammer and pressed his fingers against my temple like he had a loaded weapon. I swerved over the white boundary line and gravel from the shoulder clinked under my car. I steered back between the lines as a maroon Oldsmobile pulled out to the stop sign at an intersection on the passenger’s side and stuck its fender out into the road to make a left-hand turn. It honked at us.

“Whatever. What turned you into an Andy Griffith?” He fell back in his seat again, sighing. “It’s your senior year. Do something crazy with it.”

We came to the hard left where signs were posted warning to slow down to twenty-five and three yellow arrows pointed you in the direction you were supposed to go as you rounded the turn. I usually didn’t take the turn at twenty-five, but with Wes in the car I dipped down to twenty. A thought occurred to me just then that I didn’t even know for sure if he was released from jail or if he was just lying about the whole stint. Maybe the guy was actually *fleeing* from a crime. It had to take desperate circumstances, I mean, to ever try hitchhiking along fifty-six. If I was being honest with myself, I didn’t know anything about Wes since we rode together on the bus. The cops could have been searching for him and I could have got nailed with aiding and abetting, or whatever you called what I was doing. I wished I knew the legal system better so that I would have known exactly what charges might have been brought against me in that case. I knew it was illegal to pick up a hitchhiker. I could at least get nailed with that. I wasn’t sure I could even trust Wes’s story about his aunt. It all sounded bogus. Every last detail: the sledge hammer, the door—even the sleeping bag. Maybe the story about him bludgeoning the other guy who picked him up was really true. Who knew? He really had me bent out of shape. Man, I felt



paranoid. Really straight-laced. I bit my thumbnail, but the nail didn't tear the way a pair of clippers would cut it and I tore into the skin. The nail hung off the cut, which oozed with bright red blood.

"Getting nervous?" Wes said. He was back to wetting down the tuft of hair in the visor. It was spring-loaded no matter how much water weight he added.

"Nervous?" I said. I pressed my finger over the cut on my thumb and left the nail hanging from the flesh.

"That's another thing you pick up in county. When a guy's nervous, he bites his nails. What's making you nervous? It's not me—your *brother*—is it?"

"No."

"Then, what is it?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You're obviously nervous," he said. He slammed the visor shut and dug his fingers into my temple again the way he would have pressed a loaded handgun against my head. We started onto bridge with cement walls that led over a creek that sometimes after the snowmelt flooded the yard of the house that was built beside it so that the people there lived on an island for two or three weeks of the year and used a canoe to check their mail. I almost steered across the road and rammed into the cement wall. "I don't like it when people are nervous around me. You bit yourself into a hangnail. Then, what *is* it? What made you bite yourself into a hangnail?"

"It wasn't you. It wasn't my brother. It was the turn."

"The turn?" He pressed harder and harder. We got across the bridge. The other side of my head touched the warm glass of the driver's side window. I pulled off the road into a gravel lot in front of a vacant field where sometimes you saw birdwatchers pull off to peer through binoculars

into the distant trees. I never knew what they were looking for. There were no eagles' nests around Mt. Sterling. Not that I ever heard of. The only birds I ever saw of any interest along fifty-six were vultures when the carcass of a white-tailed deer was left gutted on the side of the road to bake in the sun.

"I never think I'm going to slow down enough," I said. "It's a hard turn, and there's no guardrail."

"You know what would be funny?" Wes said.

"What?"

"If you drove us both over the edge and we flew into the cornfields like we were flying off a ramp. Wouldn't that have been funny? Haven't you always wanted to be a stuntman?"

"I guess so."

"Wouldn't that have been a riot?"

"It would have been a riot."

"Good," he said, and dropped his knuckles from my temple. "We both think it would be a riot, as brothers should. I've got a confession to make to you, Lil' Davy. Do you want to hear it?"

"Sure." We were already past the last farmhouse before we got into town.

"I'm not afraid of dying," he said. "As a matter of fact, I want to die. I wish you had used that turn as a ramp."

"Why?" I said.

"It's a way to escape. I just want some way to escape my Dad's house, so I don't have to live with him or my aunt anymore. They give me claustrophobia, man."

"There are other ways to escape."

“I know. I’ve thought of them. Take this road we’re on, Ohio State Route 56. Do you ever look at road maps?”

“Sometimes,” I said.

“Well, think of it. Think of Ohio 56. If you take it all the way through Sterling and another four miles out of town, then you can hook up with I-71 South, on the ramp where my sister was killed. You take I-71 down into Cincinnati and then on into Louisville, you hook up with another interstate, I-64, which starts you due west, whereas before you were headed southwest. You take that interstate into St. Louis and you finally can hook up with I-44, which hooks you up with I-40, which takes you all the way out west to California. It’s only a day and fifteen hours of driving, and your life is turned on its head. It’s as easy as that. Crazy, isn’t it? All we’d have to do is follow fifty-six to the interstates, and our lives would be turned on their heads.”

“Yeah, it’s crazy.”

“Don’t you think it’s crazy?”

“Yeah, it’s crazy.”

“We could track down my drug addict mom,” he said. “She’d be sure to take us in, or if she doesn’t have a house, we could pick her off the streets and take her into our hotel.”

Neither of us said anything for a while. We just sat parked in that gravel lot. My breathing hadn’t slowed down yet, and my heart was pounding and it felt like I had acid reflux disease. I punched myself on the chest. I didn’t want to go to California. I didn’t want to meet Wes’s drug addict mom. I just wanted to be parked in my own driveway again, which seemed about as far away as the Pacific coast at that point. My hangnail was still bleeding. I put my

thumb in my mouth and bit the nail off the rest of the way. I rolled down my window so that I could spit it out.

“I’ve decided I’m not going to stick around this place much longer,” Wes said, finally breaking the silence. I turned on my blinker and turned back onto the road. We started into town.

“Are you going to California?” I said.

“Probably not. You don’t want to drive me there right now, do you?”

“I can’t.” I cringed and braced myself for him to actually pull out a real handgun this time. He didn’t though. He only sighed.

“I figured you wouldn’t,” he said. “Listen, it’s just crazy talk. Maybe I’m half serious, but I don’t think I can be anything but half serious anymore. Do you know what I think you should do instead of California?”

“What?” I said.

“Finish your poster board on the Manhattan Project. After that, get a degree. Get it in physics so that you can build an atom bomb. Then, give it to me because I want to blow it up in one of the cornfields, just to test it, and maybe kill a few crows. I need thrills in my life, you see?”

“I see.”

“Maybe I’ll never get out of here. Is that poster board for Mr. Mueller’s American Government class?”

“Yeah. Did you have Mueller?”

“Sure did,” he said. “Some things never change. Give him my regards in class tomorrow. Tell him you helped me get home from jail. You know what I bet he’ll say?”

“What’s that?”

“He’ll say, ‘That’s just about what I expected out of Wes Addle.’”

We went two blocks into town and then I turned onto Main Street. The old swimming pool was another couple blocks down Main. It was closed down now because of a lack of funding from town hall. Wes pointed out his house to me once we got there. The driveway was off an alley that connected Main Street with Columbus Street, the other major street in Sterling that ran parallel to Main until the two streets intersected at a fork and both became state route sixty-two, which could take you into the city of Columbus if you followed it long enough. I was going to be in Columbus next year. I was going to be at state. People always told me I didn’t seem like the type of guy who would get into fights, but maybe that’s why sometimes I felt the urge to clobber someone or put my fist through a dry wall. I knew there was more to me deep down—more angst, more venom, more anarchy—than anyone gave me credit for. It was the impulse to make others know my true inner lawlessness that fueled the desire to fight. But when I was able to look at the consequences of getting into a fight, I didn’t want to do anything but drop f-bombs and shake hands. Maybe if I’d really beaten the guy today in Gov class—bloodied his face, and left him with a swollen eye—he would have pressed charges against me. Then, I could have been tried as an adult and ended up in county, boxing my cellmate for the toilet, if Wes’s stories about jail were really true. Deep down, I was pretty sure I was just as wild and headstrong as Wes. Maybe more. We were both maniacs. But I just had better foresight, and probably less guts, than he did. Maybe it was only the fear of getting my teeth knocked out that kept me restrained. Since I quit lifting for the football team after my freshman year, most of the guys I hung out with outweighed me by at least ten pounds. It wasn’t brotherly love, though, or regard for others’ well-being or any of that chivalric code crap that Cervantes railed on in *Don Quixote* when we read it last winter for AP English. If I’d ever been a knight back in the middle

ages, with armor and a sword for self-defense, I probably would have picked a fight with the freaking king. At the heart of it all, then, it was self-preservation that kept me from being a hothead. Nothing else.

I waited in the driveway for Wes while he got his gym bag out of the back and walked across the lawn to the front porch. He knocked, but after a half minute or so, no one came to the door. He waved me off, anyway. As I turned around and got back on Main, I saw him in my rearview mirror seated on a lawn chair on his front porch, lighting a cigarette, and waiting for someone to show up and let him inside.

### Pocket-Sized New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs

In January, when the weather dropped below freezing, Twenty-Nine and several other homeless people slept on the stairwell in back of Apollo's Greek Kitchen in Columbus, OH. They kept warm by zipping their sleeping bags to their chins and gripping the hand warmer packs that they received from the Lutheran church on 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue. They also slipped toe warmer packs into their work boots. The packaging on the hand and toe warmers advertized "Up to 10 Hours of Heat." When they lost their heat, they were discarded in the alleyway dumpsters like ragged teddy bears.

Early in the morning of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, as Twenty-Nine slept on Apollo's stairwell, wrapped in a sheet of weatherproof blue tarp in place of a sleeping bag, his friend H.S. jostled him awake. According to H.S., his initials stood for his given name, "Harold Seaborn," but Twenty-Nine and everyone else on the streets knew him as "High Schooler" because he talked about his years playing street ball at Yoctangee Park in Chillicothe as though he were still

on the junior varsity basketball team with dreams of becoming the NBA's Caucasian Magic Johnson.

"Twenty-Nine, when's the Super Bowl?" H.S. said.

"Super Bowl?" Twenty-Nine said. "They ain't no—ahem—" (He cleared the phlegm from his throat.) "They ain't no Super Bowl this week."

"Twenty-Nine, you didn't answer my question." H.S. jumped and clapped his hands, jostling Twenty-Nine between claps. "If it ain't this week, when's the Super Bowl?"

"Super Bowl gon' come a lot quicker if you don't let me sleep. I'mma get up and tackle you down them stairs."

As Twenty-Nine rolled over on his side, he punched H.S.'s kneecap. H.S.'s leg slipped out from under him and he banged his knee on the concrete landing.

"C'mon, Twenty-Nine, don't you wanna get something to drink at the UDF?" H.S. said. "Let's say we get wasted tonight like we just won the Super Bowl."

"Tonight?" Twenty-Nine said, facing the A/C unit against the wall. "High Schooler, you saltine cracker, what in the world do you mean 'tonight'? It's gotta be five o'clock in the morning."

"You's a morning drinker, too, ain't you?"

"Not this morning. I ain't been asleep but two hours."

"A little beer'll put you back to sleep."

"Why in the world do I gotta be put back to sleep when I's already asleep—at least before you showed up?"

"C'mon, Twenty-Nine, just split a tall boy with me. Please? I *know* you got the money."



“Maybe I do, or maybe I don’t,” Twenty-Nine said. “It’s not for *you* to know how much money I got saved up.”

“What’s with you all of a sudden turning into a tightwad?” H.S. said. “You be acting like your money’s locked away in a savings account at the Huntington Bank—instead of in your pockets.” He jostled Twenty-Nine in his blue tarp and then left him alone. His footsteps pounded on the wooden steps that led to the street level.

Once he was gone, Twenty-Nine rolled over onto his back again so that he was no longer lying on a bottle of amoxicillin capsules (given to him for a strain of pneumonia) and a pocket-sized New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs. The New Testament had a green cover made of imitation leather and was stamped with a gold Gideons International emblem. On the front page of the book, Twenty-Nine had written his name and the dates of the four separate occasions on which he had been baptized: once at the Lutheran church on 13<sup>th</sup>, once at a Baptist church, once at a United Methodist church, and once at a Korean church when he befriended a Korean international student who used to buy him footlongs from Subway as an act of Christian charity. With each baptism, Twenty-Nine vowed it would be the time he gave up all the iniquities of his heart.

The navy blue exterior of Twenty-Nine’s puffer coat was shredded at one of the underarms. Cotton fibers with balled ends dangled from the stuffing inside. Jacobi Borders’s words from the morning before echoed in his head: “No way to face the cold, Twenty-Nine. You need to get yourself a new coat.”

On Sunday morning, Jacobi Borders, the intern at the Lutheran church that passed out the hand and toe warmers, drove Twenty-Nine to the health and wellness center on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue to see a group of volunteer physicians. For Twenty-Nine, it was the second time in his life that he was

diagnosed with pneumonia. The first time he caught it he was a toddler. He hardly remembered that now, though there was a dim recollection, buried somewhere deep down—and maybe it wasn't even a recollection at all—of operating room lights and men in powder blue cough masks and latex gloves administering a shot into one of his chubby triceps. He heard his name then. His real name. Understood it among many gurgles. The doctors didn't call him Twenty-Nine then. His street name originated many years later, in 1982, with the birth of his only daughter, Sheila. In that year, he adopted the name "Zero," and every subsequent year his name increased numerically by one with Sheila's age. Come this March, he would no longer be known as Twenty-Nine, but as "The Big Three-O." Sheila turned thirty on the day after St. Patrick's Day. But before he was Zero, and before he was Twenty-Nine or The Big Three-O, he was known by one and only one name year after year, and it was the doctors called him as they administered a shot into his tricep. Then, he was gurgle Otis Myles gurgle gurgle.

But the scene may not have been a recollection at all. The operating room lights, the men in blue cough masks—even the gurgles—they could have been rooted only in a childhood nightmare, a clip from a television show, or a false memory that his parents and siblings planted in him during his preschool years by suggesting an overnight stay at a hospital, an experience that actually happened, but long before young Otis had the faculties to remember it distinctly. If the impressions of the hospital stay were rooted in such a place, then the nightmare, television show, false memory—or whatever it was—spawned in Twenty-Nine's brain an apparition that remained realer in his adult years than the ghost of Biggie Smalls, glimpsed in the dark basement of Bernie's Bagels and Deli during a meth overdose. At the health and wellness center, he wouldn't allow the volunteer physicians to stick him in the arm with needles. He had to be stuck in the butt.

Twenty-Nine hacked phlegm and plucked at the dried strands of snot that clung like icicles to his goatee, which, without grooming, grew into a splotchy beard on his neck and cheeks and exuded a tang of stale pilsner and chili powder. The natural sable of his facial hair was speckled with gray hairs that jutted out in various directions from his face as though charged with static electricity. As he nodded off, a set of footsteps seemed to slide against the wooden surface of the steps rather than beat on it. They were lighter, and less rapid, than H.S.'s steps going down a few minutes earlier. Their rhythmic climb towards him was like dance steps in slow motion under strobe lights inside a nightclub or like side shuffles on a basketball court at half-speed. The pitter-patter of the shoes neared Twenty-Nine's right ear and then stopped. With a *thwack*, an object like a washcloth soaked in ice water landed on the bridge of his nose and blinded his view of the second floor landing's underbelly. Drops of cold water trickled down the rims of his nostrils into his parted lips and rushed the taste of potting soil onto his palate.

"High Schooler, what you tryin' to pull?" Twenty-Nine said. He slid his arm out from under the blue tarp and grabbed the object from his face. The glow from the alley streetlight showed it to be a white ankle sock, stamped with a Nike logo on the elastic band and saturated with brown slush. Twenty-Nine threw the tarp off of him and rose to his feet. Standing toe-to-toe with H.S., he gave him a shove to the chest, propelling him backwards to the edge of the steps. "Quit your playing, or I swear, boy, I'mma tackle you down them steps. Super Bowl gon' come real early, you see."

H.S. caught his balance on the handrail and fled halfway down the stairs. He turned around to face Twenty-Nine and gave a time-out signal.

"I was here giving you a sleep mask, Twenty-Nine," H.S. said, "'cause I thought you said you be needing more sleep." He tittered behind a grin that showed two front teeth of different

lengths, as though they formed naturally that way over time like stalactites from a ceiling of pink gums. A clown's smile. A clown that came straight up from Appalachia with a one-ring circus. The smile always served as a reminder of the time H.S. said he was related to former NFL and Ohio State wide receiver Cris Carter, by marriage and not by blood. (That explained their different skin tones.) He smiled the same clown smile then, too. To add to the lie, he even memorized Carter's birthday: November 25, 1965. Not even "Carter" to H.S., but just "Cris." Twenty-Nine discovered only a week later that all of H.S.'s relatives, except for an older sister, were dead, in prison, or homeless.

"Oh, I be needing more sleep, alright," Twenty-Nine said. "But now I ain't gonna get it because of you—I see that's pretty clear. I tell you what, if it'd make you shut up, I'll buy you a tall boy. Ain't gonna be nothing but Natty Ice, but I'll buy you a tall boy."

"I ain't picky. I'll drink a Natty Ice. Matter of fact, that's all's I was gonna you ask for."

Twenty-Nine stretched and yawned. H.S. pointed to the hole in his underarm.

"Jacobi can get you a new coat," he said. "That way you don't gotta go swimming through the dumpsters like you's wadding in the kiddie pool."

Twenty-Nine felt through the pocket of his sweatpants as he rubbed the inside of the hole. He pulled out a wad of crumpled dollar bills and counted them out individually. There were six of them total.

"Jacobi do enough for me as it is," Twenty-Nine said. "He don't got to be buying me a new coat. I figure him and his church don't make half of what I got saved up." He stuffed the dollar bills back into his pocket. "They get they money same way I do—people giving it to 'em outta charity. 'Sides, if he ever deposit his micro Jacobis into that wife of his, and earn interest, he gon' be spending every penny of his savings on baby clothes. I been there. Wasn't no room

for new coats once I deposited my micro Twenty-Nines back in eighty-two. I got nine pounds, eight ounces of interest. Ya feel me?”

“I feel ya,” H.S. said. “You best be politer to them college kids you get your change from. Otherwise, the only way I can imagine you making enough money for a new coat before the winter’s up is if you get the outlet to pay you for shoveling. Maybe you can get Jacobi to pray that God will bring down snow from the sky.”

Twenty-Nine spent his days under the awning of a strip mall on the corner of 13<sup>th</sup> and High shouting profanities at the OSU students who walked to their afternoon classes from the off-campus housing district east of High. His slurs attacked them on the grounds of race, social class, and perceived sexual orientation. Occasionally, he also asked one of the passers-by for their spare change. When he received a rejection (and he usually did), he upped the request to one hundred dollars in cash, sometimes even a million.

To supplement his meager income from panhandling, Twenty-Nine was sometimes paid to do odd jobs for the businesses in the strip mall. When the tattoo parlor next to the beer and cigarette outlet went out of business back in December, before Christmas, several of the homeless people were hired to clear out the inside of the store and move the tattoo chairs into a white van parked at one of the meters. Twenty-Nine made five dollars to sweep the cigarette butts from the porch and the sidewalks. In the winter months, he was paid a handsomer sum, ten dollars, for shoveling snow.

H.S. turned and started the rest of the way down the stairs. Once he was three or four steps from the street, he turned towards the handrail and, clutching it with both hands and squatting in place, bounded over the edge. He waited for Twenty-Nine in the street, warming his hands inside his coat pockets. Before he started down the stairs, Twenty-Nine grabbed the

handrail for balance and slid off each of his work boots. He pulled out the used toe warmers and discarded them onto the blue tarp along with a balled receipt paper and toothpick splinters from his sweatpants. The January breeze nipped his socked feet, and he stepped back into his boots, the soles like two lukewarm planks of wood.

H.S. handed Twenty-Nine his receipt and change from the Natty Ice once they were standing on the porch of the strip mall at the corner of 13<sup>th</sup> and High. Twenty-Nine balled up the receipt around his change and dropped them into his pocket. The strip mall included, among other stores, a Subway, a beer and cigarette outlet, and a barber shop called Teck's that specialized in buzzcuts and kept a stack of Playboys in the waiting area for its predominantly male clientele. 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue ran east and west and reached a dead end at the brick-lined sidewalk before it intersected High Street. The end of 13<sup>th</sup> turned into a parking lot for the strip mall with spaces that ran perpendicular to the flow of traffic on the road. Only one car was parked in front of the strip mall as H.S. and Twenty-Nine passed the can of beer back and forth, each taking long gulps as though the cold pilsner had the warming effects of a cup of hot chocolate made from a powdered drink mix. The Natty Ice logo was concealed inside a brown paper bag.

As they drank under the awning, the squeal of ungreased shopping cart wheels turned Twenty-Nine's attention to the alley. A lanky figure cloaked in a zip-up hoodie the color of a prison jumpsuit turned the corner onto the sidewalk across from the strip mall. Inside of the shopping cart he pushed were black trash bags filled with the empty beer cans he collected from the front lawns in the off-campus housing district. The man in the orange hoodie was known by others on the streets as "Screwdriver" because of a Phillips head he kept tucked in his tennis shoe and threatened to jam into Twenty-Nine's gut one night after Twenty-Nine told a freshman girl

as she passed by (she supposedly reminded Screwdriver of his niece) that if her neckline ended three inches lower he wouldn't have to beg on the streets to buy up the R-rated Hallie Berry movies at the used video store.

Screwdriver wheeled the cart to the wooden bench along High Street and scooted down to the end. He began to rummage through a trash can that was encircled by a steel cage with painted black bars. On the porch, H.S. puffed on a cigarette. When the ember neared the filter, he tapped the ashes from the end and dropped it onto the sidewalk.

"There," he said and slid the can of beer out of Twenty-Nine's grasp. "See if that don't bring you work. At least five dollars for sweeping."

"He better get off my bench," Twenty-Nine said to H.S., who was sipping out of the brown bag with his eyes closed. He took the can away from his mouth and ran his coat sleeve over his lips.

"Get off your what?" H.S. said.

"My bench," Twenty-Nine said.

"Who's on your bench?"

Twenty-Nine pointed at Screwdriver.

"Screwdriver?" H.S. said.

"I don't care who it is—Screwdriver, Hammer, Wrench, or whatever gadget he calls himself outta the hardware store," Twenty-Nine said. "He better get off my bench."

"You drunk already, Twenty-Nine? It ain't your bench. It's the public's bench. I say let him have it if he wants—let him sleep on it. I ain't about to get my throat cut by a Phillips head covered in his athlete's foot."

“I got my ways of defending myself. Don’t you worry nothing ’bout no Phillips-head.” Inside his coat pocket, he felt over the bottle of pills and the New Testament for the handle of a paint scraper. It wasn’t there, but in his other coat pocket.

“Well, I do,” H.S. said. “And if you provoke him to slice your throat, chances are, he’s gonna slice mine, too. Just guzzle down the rest of this tall boy and keep your mouth shut.”

He handed Twenty-Nine the can of beer. As Twenty-Nine sipped on it, he kept his eyes locked on the bench across the parking lot. He tipped his head back and swallowed the remainder of liquid in the can, flavorless as tap water.

Screwdriver tossed an empty from the trash can into one of his bags and wheeled the cart towards the strip mall. He parked his cart next to the bike rack at the end of the porch. Attracted to the glowing embers of H.S.’s discarded cigarette butt, he picked it up off the ground and sucked out the final two hits. Then, he climbed the stairs of the porch and clutched his knees to his chest to sleep in the corner behind Twenty-Nine and H.S., oblivious to both of them.

“You better not be sleeping in that corner,” Twenty-Nine said. “Cops gonna stop letting us stand here if they catch you sleeping.”

“Listen to what he say, Screwdriver,” H.S. said. “You can sleep on that bench down there or behind Apollo’s in the alley all you want. We’ll give you a place snug and warm. I’ll bring you blankets. But I don’t wanna be caught out in the open when the snow come this week or the next. This roof be all the shelter we got. The cops is saying they’ll take away our privileges.”

Screwdriver looked up and pushed the hood away from his face.

“I’ll sleep where I sleep,” he said. “Don’t be poking through my cart for them cans, neither. You ain’t been roaming up and down frat row to get them.”



“I ain’t gonna touch your cans,” Twenty-Nine said. “I’ve got enough money shoveling if I get me some snow this week.”

“Gonna be in the high fifties today,” Screwdriver said. “A real warm up from what it is now. Ain’t gonna be another chance of snow ’til Thursday. You don’t be touching my garbage sacks in the meantime. Now, if you please, I’m going to sleep. I don’t care what no cops say.”

He pulled his hood over his eyes and pulled the drawstring. Screwdriver appeared on the streets only two weeks ago. None of the other homeless men were sure where he came from, only that he claimed to have been born in Flint, Michigan. How long he lived there, or when he came to Ohio was unknown. He slept in the alleys by himself and during the day bought a pre-wrapped cheese Danish or a bear claw at the UDF and thumbed through the hip-hop magazines on the rack in front of the plate glass windows that looked out on the intersection. Most of the others, including Twenty-Nine and H.S., speculated that he was recently released from the state penitentiary, but the idea was only suggested to them by his belligerence towards the cops and the orange hoodie Screwdriver was seen wearing day after day, as though prison life gave him a fondness for the color orange, or he was cursed to have the color cling to him like a tick, whether in or out of the penitentiary.

Screwdriver tucked his knees into his chest once again and closed his eyes. Twenty-Nine gripped the handle of the rusty paint scraper in his pocket. As Screwdriver started to snore, H.S. pointed in his direction and asked for Twenty-Nine’s bottle of amoxicillin capsules. Twenty-Nine let go of the scraper and gave them to him. Snorting as he suppressed his laughter, H.S. knelt down beside Screwdriver and shook the pill bottle in his ear. In a swift motion, showing no sign of surprise at having been woken from his sleep, Screwdriver slid his Phillips head screwdriver from his sock and slashed H.S. across the hand. H.S. dropped the bottle of pills and,

with a howl, clutched his wrist. The strike left a gash that ran diagonally from the middle of his backhand to the pinky knuckle. Blood dripped on the cement floor and blotted the label on the orange bottle.

“That’ll silence those maracas in my ear,” Screwdriver said. He thrust the point of the screwdriver into H.S.’s cheek and, without penetrating the pincushion-like skin, twisted the handle.

Standing off by the rail, Twenty-Nine gripped the scraper inside his coat. As he stepped forward and attempted to unsheathe the weapon, the end of the blade caught on the outer flap of his pocket, and the scraper clattered on the cement at his feet. He bent down to pick it up. Responding on reflex to the clatter of metal, Screwdriver stretched out his free arm into a fist and pounded Twenty-Nine’s fingers into the floor as he fumbled for his scraper. Twenty-Nine groaned and squeezed the shooting pain in his knuckles. He stumbled and kicked the scraper across the floor into the overturned pill bottle that rolled on the outer rim of its safety lid when it was knocked. Screwdriver took the scraper into his possession.

“Well, lookee here,” Screwdriver said. “Exhibit A.” He dropped the point of the screwdriver from H.S.’s cheek and examined the paint scraper under the streetlight. “I see what your plan was all along. First you trouble me in my sleep. Then you stick me with a rusty piece of scrap metal. Twenty-Nine, they oughta call you ‘Scraper’ this year. I don’t care how old your daughter be turning in March, whether it’s thirty or ninety-nine.”

“We’s just trying to protect our spot here on the porch,” Twenty-Nine said. “You provoked me into defending my friend. Otherwise, I wasn’t gonna use that thing on you. I keep it only for defense purposes. You can bring me up to the Judge in Heaven to swear to that.”

“Defense or no defense,” Screwdriver said. “You ain’t getting it back now. You best believe that.” He slid the scraper into his sock. “Now get yourselves on outta here and let me rest this morning. I’ll sleep where I sleep. No cop or no amateur painter is going to tell me otherwise.” He laid his head down but kept his eyes open and his fingers around the handle of the Phillips head.

H.S. staggered away from him pressing his open cut against the leg of his jeans to absorb the blood into the cotton. The head of the screwdriver left a cross-shaped impression on his cheek, but no blood.

“C’mon, Twenty-Nine, since it’s what he wants, we gon’ let him get arrested, then,” he said. “No use in fighting for our porch. It’s as good as lost. We don’t be killing no one or getting killed ourselves this morning. It ain’t in the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”

He crept down the stairs with his hand pressed against his jeans and walked across the sidewalk to the bench. He took a seat.

Twenty-Nine hacked up phlegm and spit. His mouthful of saliva and snot smacked the ground and splashed his work boot. His scraper was holstered snugly inside of Screwdriver’s sock, unattainable. As he turned to go down the steps, he flexed his fingers inside the silk lining of his coat pocket, squeezing the New Testament the way he would a foam stress ball that UDF sold in a cardboard crate next to the register. He turned back around. The drop of red absorbed into the label turned the name of the medication into two words, spaced out unevenly with the other words on the line: AM IN. A divine message. Twenty-Nine opened up to chapter nine in the Gospel of John and read the words that the pill bottle brought to mind as he stood under the glow of the streetlight: “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” The words seemed to call to him as though from the bottom of a stonewalled well—the same way the name Otis

Myles called to him through the gurgles in the memory, or false memory, formed many years ago during his childhood. He closed the book and picked up the capsules. Not hard to decode the message. The Almighty knew as well as he that the paint scraper was out of his possession. Opportune time for a fifth baptism. It would be just like putting on a used coat out of the alleyway dumpster. As he walked down the stairs to the bench, Screwdriver choking on snores behind him, Twenty-Nine vowed that, with this baptism, he would finally turn from all the iniquities of his heart.

### Yellow-Roofed Chicken Coop

Towards the end of her life, my mother-in-law recognized no one. Her Alzheimer's made her into a shell. She called Rex, her husband of sixty-one years, "an old rotten man" and spoke almost every day about her parents' chicken farm in Beverly, where she and her younger sister were raised during the Depression. When we would visit her at the nursing home in Marietta, she stared at Mel, her son, like he was a stranger buying farm fresh eggs. She only responded to our questions with things like, "Someone better throw a handfulla feed to them chickens or they'll starve." And, "Them rainclouds are gonna keep Mom from working in her garden." She died the Monday before Valentine's Day.

Two days later, we lost Rex from diabetes complications. Mel sat up with him at the ICU and said afterwards that his feet were so full of fluid that they looked like two IV bags in a pair of tube socks. Rex couldn't even walk to use the toilet. His feces sloshed around in a pool of urine inside a plastic yellow bedpan until the nursing staff responded to his buzzer. His vision

failed him, too. His cataracts made him so blind that he couldn't watch CNN even when the nurses wheeled him into the lobby to sit in front of the nursing home's forty-inch HD television. Mel kept him up on world politics over the phone and when he visited him in-person. He told him about President Obama's inauguration and Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme, once that whole thing got exposed. Rex congratulated the "American nigger" on finally getting one of his own into office and said that Madoff was lucky the reporters only shoved him as he was walking down the sidewalk because if he were there he would've slugged him in the nose.

Mel hung up from their talks saying that all the doctors needed to do to keep both his parents alive was perform a successful brain transplant, his brain into her body. One night as he lay under the comforter waiting for me to unscrew my earrings at my dresser, he joked that the operation would give new meaning to the term "one flesh."

"Just think, Candace," he said, "it would make me the son of Frankenstein's monster and you the daughter-in-law."

I knew then that Mel knew there wasn't much time left. He only told obnoxious jokes about Frankenstein when the sad parts in movies came.

Mel and I attended his mom's funeral on February 12, and his dad's was set for Valentine's Day, a Saturday. Mel took the week off from teaching industrial arts at the high school, and I left my furniture repair business in the hands of one of the store managers. Although Rex and Millie spent most of their lives in Marietta, Rex bought the burial plots in Beverly, maybe out of respect for Millie or maybe just because he figured he could save a dollar or two in a smaller town. Our home in Gallipolis was too far to travel back between the services, so we stayed over at Mel's sister's house. Mel never moved away from the shores of the Ohio

River, but his sister, Olivia, never bothered to move away from her parents' street. When she got pregnant out of high school, she decided to become Rex and Millie's next-door neighbor and raise the baby alone with their help rather than get an abortion. The father, a man named Chris Lankie (who, as last I heard, lived outside Atlantic City, NJ and owned a tattoo shop called "Jack of Ink"), deserted her before their graduation ceremony. She never wanted to enter the dating world again, she said, because she never worked off the pregnancy weight and her breasts were no good for men to look at anymore. They were better used as sandbags in case Marietta got a record rainfall. On the coffee table in her living room, she still kept a picture of Chris in his football uniform beside group pictures from Murrow family reunions. In the team photo, he is number fifty-seven and is wearing horn-rimmed glasses as a prank on his head coach. In the top drawer of her kitchen, Olivia's senior yearbook was buried under recipe books and old issues of *Home and Garden*. Chris's half-page note to her was the only handwriting on either the front or the back cover.

Olivia gave us her bedroom, where there was a queen-sized mattress, and she slept in her daughter's old bedroom, where there was only a twin. On the night before Rex's funeral, Mel came into the bedroom with one of Olivia's pink towels around his waist and held up a copy of *Pinocchio* on VHS.

"From our niece's collection," he said. "Do you wanna watch it?"

He handed it to me and sat on the edge of the bed and began to rummage through his suitcase for a pair of boxer briefs. Drops of shower water sat on his back like hundreds of boils. I wanted to reach out and pop one, along with his brown mole in the shape of third-quarter moon. The video was in a white plastic case and the cover said "Disney Classics." I opened it. The black tape was on the left side.

“Does left side mean it’s rewound, or does the tape have to be on the right?” I said.

“Left side means rewound,” he said. The smell of his Old Spice shower gel reminded me of a time at home when we took a bath together on the advice of a marriage counselor in a self-help book that we bought for \$9.99 at the Rite-Aid. When we came to washing each other’s hair, Mel told me to use the shower gel because he was out of Suave for Men. He didn’t want to smell like my girly shampoo. Most of the hairs that clumped together in the drain were gray, his and mine like they came from the same head.

“What put you in the mood for *Pinocchio*?” I said.

“I saw a dead cricket at the funeral on Thursday,” he said. “His shelled body was beside my shoe.”

“And *that* reminded you of a wooden puppet who wants to be a real boy?”

“It reminded me of losing Jiminy Cricket. What if he died? Don’t you like Jiminy Cricket?”

“Not as much as Geppetto.”

“Why Geppetto?” he said.

“He reminds me of my husband,” I said.

“Is this an old man joke?”

“No, I was just going to say he works in a shop.”

“Never mind, then. I thought you were going to say something about my—dysfunction.”

Mel slid on a navy blue pair of his boxer briefs, while keeping the towel securely around his waist, and asked for the movie back. After thirty years of marriage, his modesty around me is almost endearing, almost. I sometimes wondered what it would have been like to have married a man who wasn’t as boyish about nudity. Sometimes he still laughed and snorted the word



“boobies” when he saw me undress from work in the evenings. Erectile dysfunction was only half the problem in generating sexual arousal when he talked dirty to me like a fifth grader who was peeping into a *Playboy* for the first time in his dad’s tool shed. But maybe that was just sex, after all. Mel’s parents, and the Rite-Aid book, helped to remind me that it could be overstressed, even in a marriage. I doubt Rex and Millie had sex when she imagined herself to be on the verge of puberty and living on her parents’ chicken farm again.

Mel’s flannel pants were strung over an armchair alongside the black silk dress I planned to wear to the service in the morning. Once he got to the other side of the room, he pushed *Pinocchio* into the VCR. Fuzzy white lines streamed across the screen and the play button arrow appeared in the top left corner. The picture adjusted as the FBI warning came on.

I turned the notch on the lamp at my side. It went into a brighter setting instead of turning off. Before I turned it again, Mel lifted a framed picture out of a cubbyhole on the entertainment center. I left the lamp on the brighter setting. He stared at the black-and-white picture of his parents as newlyweds, a Christmas present to each of the Murrow siblings five years ago. Our copy is on the mantle in our living room. In the photograph, Millie is wearing a feathered hat and a pair of elbow-length gloves. Her dress is sleeveless, and the flabbiness in her upper arms shows where Olivia inherited hers. Besides that, her figure from her pre-pregnancy days is slim and petite. Rex is dressed in a suit and his hair is greased into a sideways part. It is one of the few smiles I ever saw of him showing his teeth. Later in life, around the time Olivia got pregnant, he chipped both his front teeth in his workshop as he was in the staining stages of a kitchen table and a set of chairs. (Carpentry runs in the blood for the Murrow men like flabby arms do for the women.) As the story went, Millie came out to inspect his craftsmanship when she lifted one of the overturned chairs off the table and accidentally smacked Rex in the mouth with the leg. He got

four stitches in his upper lip and was left with a hairline scar and a pair of caps that came off every ten years or so when he bit into cold cut sandwiches.

Mel put the picture down and crawled over the covers into the spot beside me. As the Walt Disney signature spread across the screen under the castle, I flipped off the lamp and pulled the covers up to my neck.

“Did your parents meet in Beverly?” I said.

“That’s where that picture was taken,” he said. “They sat in front of a white wall inside Mom’s parents’ house instead of going to a studio to get their portrait taken.”

“So they met in Beverly?”

He stared at the movie, his arms folded behind his head, a miniature screen reflecting in each of his eyes.

“You want to hear a funny story, Candace?” he said, ignoring my question. “When I was twelve, I found that picture in an old photo album, and Dad told me the story about him and Mom sitting in front of a wall to have it taken. He said it was in order to save money for the family he hoped to have one day. I said—you know like junior high school kids say when they think supporting a wife is no more than buying your girlfriend’s milk carton—I said, ‘I bet you and Mom borrowed those clothes, too.’”

“What did your dad say?” I said.

“He busted me one in the ear. That’s what I got for being smart. Almost punctured my eardrum.”

He laughed to himself. Jiminy Cricket sang “When You Wish Upon a Star” as the credits played over a wooden background with carved designs that looked like tree branches.

“What would you wish for if you could wish upon a star, Mel?” I said.

“A spacesuit that can withstand the surface temperature of a star,” he said.

“C’mon, I was being serious. Can’t you be also? What would you wish for?”

“That you and I would die the same way my parents did, dependent on each other as though we inhabited one body.”

“That’s sweet, but don’t you think we’re already that way?”

“We’re almost there. It could take another thirty years, like it did for my parents. We’ll get there, though.”

“I look forward to it,” I said. “Did your parents meet in Beverly, Mel?”

“They met in Marietta,” he said, “but they moved to Beverly shortly after their wedding because Dad liked the idea of free cheese omelets for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. He was an egg-eater his whole life. It’s no wonder he had trouble keeping his cholesterol down. He was probably getting four *hundred* percent daily of his recommended serving during those first years in Beverly.”

Mel pulled the covers up to his chest. Even though he was wet, he refused to sleep with a shirt on. He fell asleep by the time Pinocchio got turned into a donkey. I couldn’t find the remote, so I let the video play through the very end until it stopped on its own and rewound in the VCR. As I rolled over on my side and nodded off, an announcer’s voice introduced the opening segment of the late night news.

When I woke up the next morning, the TV was on an infomercial about plastic storage bags that “sealed tighter and kept food fresher longer” by vacuuming out the air. I washed my hair over the bathtub and walked back into the bedroom rubbing my scalp with the pink hand towel that matched Mel’s towel from the night before. After I blow-dried my hair, I got into my

black dress and wrapped a woolen black scarf around my shoulders. If we were celebrating Valentine's Day, Mel probably would have fixed a canned spaghetti dinner and, for atmosphere, would have lit the scented candles from the basement that we buy out of season once they're placed on clearance. We save them for date nights and power outages. February usually means pumpkin spice or Christmas sugar cookie month. I would have worn the same silk dress if we were only celebrating Valentine's Day that year. Funeral black is the same as romantic-with-your-husband black, minus the woolen scarf.

Mel toppled out of bed as I applied lipstick in the mirror and smacked my lips together. He got into his suit. We helped each other into our coats.

As we waited for Olivia to get ready, we walked outside to the house where Mel grew up and where his parents lived up until eight months ago when they were taken to the nursing home. A stone slab led us over a drainage ditch where the rainwater ran from the backyard towards the front of the house and finally into a wider ditch along the street. The house was built by Mel's dad in the fifties up a slope from the neighboring properties. We climbed a crumbling set of stone stairs, the splits in the rock filled with moss. At the top, the evergreen bushes in the flowerbed overgrew the edge of the sidewalk: a sign that all three of them—Rex, Millie and Olivia—neglected to do the shearing over the last several months. I bent over to tear off one of the branches. The wood was rubbery and didn't snap like I expected so I had to twist it and pinch it in half between my fingers.

"Ow," I said as I pricked my thumb on a pine needle. I sucked the blood that oozed from the cut.

Mel bent over to help me. The branch broke off when he twisted it and yanked at it. He hugged me closer. His arm fit around the small of my back like the notched ends of two boards

slide into each other with wood glue. He pulled my thumb out of my mouth and pressed his own lips against the cut.

“Dracula’s kiss,” he said. I wiped his spittle on a tassel of my scarf. He made his top teeth into vampire fangs, and I laughed.

“I wish I at least pricked it for a rose, but nothing flowers in February,” I said. “Do you want my evergreen branch?”

He fanned me with it.

“Do you know how to make a wreath?” he said.

“For the graves?” I said.

“Maybe if you knew how to make a wreath.”

“We can always buy one.”

“I want to make it back early. If you’re up for it, we can still celebrate Valentine’s Day, just us two. We have a pumpkin spice candle.”

He dropped the branch on the ground.

“We’ll buy one,” he said. “I don’t know how to make a wreath.”

We could see into the living room through the window that went the length and almost the full height of the wall. All the pieces of furniture—the rose-patterned sofas, the coffee tables with the cloth doilies, and Rex’s leather lazy-boy that was cracked at armrests and the seat—were auctioned off after Rex and Millie moved out. Rex said his kids and grandkids probably wanted cash more than a chair or an armoire or an old box spring that wouldn’t sell for half their true value at a garage sale. Mel and the other Murrow siblings were allowed to salvage any items that they wanted from the house before the auction. He brought home one of his dad’s German cuckoo clocks without bidding on it. It was missing the bird or whatever else was supposed to

come out at the top when the hour struck and instead it only cuckooed as an abandoned wooden plank poked through the door. The clock had two fake pinecones at the end of the chains we pulled on to wind it. After we had it hanging over the mantle for less than a week, it fell behind the other clocks in our house by a couple of hours. We kept it nailed to the wall, anyway, with the hour hand on seven and the minute hand one tick over the nine. According to the clock on my cell phone, we needed to add two hours and fourteen minutes to know the time of the cuckoo clock's death.

Mel and I walked up the steps to the front porch and tried the door knob. It was locked. We peeked inside the mailbox at the cobwebs and shelled remains of dead beetles. No mail. As we picked out the beetles and threw them over the porch into the flowerbed, Olivia honked the horn inside our SUV and slid into the backseat. We walked back down the mossy steps and over the drainage ditch to her driveway. The funeral was a twenty mile drive on state route sixty. We hugged a tributary river of the Ohio most of the way into Beverly.

McGordy Funeral Home was located across the street from the town park, one block off the main road. It was a two-story white house with a low metal gate encircling the front yard. If not for a plain white sign with black letters that said it was a funeral home, I might have thought the building was still a private residence. After his parents died (I heard his father, who passed away more recently, was killed in a car accident in the early nineties), the McGordy son converted his childhood home into a business. A pair of seven-foot-high bushes at the end of the walkway in the front created a tunnel for coffins to pass through on their way to the burial sites. The three of us squeezed through the bushes in single file and the branches scraped against my coat, clinging to it like cold, frostbitten fingers.

Because we drove from our house for Millie's service, we were the last to arrive except for Chris Lankie, who (as a surprise to all of us) flew into Columbus International from New Jersey after getting an email from Olivia about the services. Olivia did not say whether she regretted inviting him or was pleased to see him. She did not invite him to stay at her own home and said she sent him the email simply because of her daughter. Instead, he stayed in a Holiday Inn across the Ohio River from Marietta in Parkersburg, WV. Olivia joked it was as though he were using the river as a war trench between him and the mother of his child and as though the Holiday Inn were his war fortress, complete with a free continental breakfast, an indoor swimming pool and a hot tub. The more extravagant her analogies, the more uneasy I knew she was.

Coming only from Olivia's, we were the first to arrive for Rex's funeral. The service was set to begin at eleven. We got there an hour early. The director of the funeral home shook our hands and let us into the building, though he wasn't changed into his suit yet. He wore a green and white flannel tucked into a pair of blue jeans. His silver belt buckle was shaped like an oval and in the middle there was an etching of a cowboy on horseback lassoing a hornless calf. It looked like it came from a rodeo. His hair was damp with sweat. The mud caked on the director's cowboy boots also gave him the look of a person who was at a rodeo that morning and got tossed off a bull. A shovel leaned against the outside wall beside the doorbell. The spade was caked with fresh clods of dirt.

I used the restroom once we got inside. There was a pair of slacks and a black blazer inside a plastic cover hanging on a hook on the door. The director's, I thought. His change of clothes from the rodeo.

After I washed my hands and adjusted my scarf in the mirror, I joined Mel and Olivia in the parlor. They were seated on a pea green loveseat with brass pins that formed a border around the heart-shaped backrest. The armrests were threadbare in places, manila foam bleeding through the seams. The seat creaked as Mel tugged on his pant legs so that they didn't ride up past the burgundy diamond pattern on his dress socks. Over the fireplace, the picture of Rex and Millie as newlyweds was framed in brass. It was probably the original copy that Millie kept on her nightstand. When we showed it to her later in life and asked her if she knew who those people were in the picture, she only stared at them and said, "If you drained the grease outta that man's hair, you could panfry a potato."

The fireplace was behind a collapsible steel gate. There was no fire and the ashes were swept clean, as though there had not been a fire since the heating unit was installed. The thermostat on the wall read seventy-three degrees Fahrenheit. Two days before, the director told us, "Make yourselves at home with the heating unit." I pressed the up arrow four times and sat in an armchair next to Olivia. "At home" to me meant at least seventy-seven.

"Do you think that picture is crooked?" Olivia said.

I inspected the newlyweds more closely inside their golden picture frame. They looked like they were sitting on a boat at sea, beating against a gentle wave. In Olivia's lap, there were several sheets of notebook paper creased into thirds with words in black ink filling the lines.

"You're nervous about the eulogy, aren't you?" I said. She gave Millie's eulogy at the funeral two days before and now she was going to give Rex's as well. Olivia had natural talent as a writer. Mel always said that if she hadn't gotten pregnant, she could have gone to college to become an English teacher or a journalist. She read all of Charles Dickens's novels before she left high school. Because she never got a chance to attend college, however, she worked full-time



as manager at the IGA in Marietta and used her writing talents to publish an anonymous letter-to-the-editor every other month in the local newspaper. She never read any other writer's novels in their entirety besides Dickens. IGA never gave her lunch breaks that were long enough.

Olivia made her fingers into a goalpost, her thumbs connected at the tips, as though she were back in high school waiting for Chris Lankie to flick a paper football off the table during study hall. Looking through her goalpost, she closed one eye and tilted her head in the direction the picture was tilted.

"I'm going to adjust it," she said.

Mel grabbed her arm as she started out of her seat. The loveseat creaked under his weight.

"Practice your speech," he said. He shifted towards me. "Candace, will you adjust that picture for my sister? She's acting fidgety."

I walked to the fireplace, slid the piece of cardboard out from the back of the frame, and straightened the picture so that the newlyweds were safely afloat on the sea again, no longer beating the waves. I placed them back on the mantle and sat back down next to Olivia, who was biting her nails, hunched over the handwritten speech. She folded the pages in her lap and looked at the wall, as though she were peering into the audience of mourners. She straightened herself.

"...as today we gather to pay our condolences to my father, a man of—" she began to say this memorized portion aloud, but paused and opened the pages again and ran over the lines with her finger.

"A man of deep contemplation, ingenuity, and terse sayings," she said. She tapped me on the wrist, still holding her finger to the line in her speech. "Did that last sentence sound ostentatious to you?"

“What’s ‘ostentatious’?” I said. “‘Showy’?”

“So you thought it was ‘showy’?”

“I just wanted to know what ‘ostentatious’ means. Does it mean ‘showy’? I haven’t looked at my SAT vocabulary words since high school.”

“Showy has the same meaning of ostentatious. Did that sentence sound ‘showy’?”

“Read it again,” I said.

She read the sentence again. Others from Rex’s family began to file into the parlor. Mel yanked his pant legs over the burgundy diamonds. The loveseat creaked.

“Did it sound ostentatious, or showy?” Olivia said.

“I don’t think so,” I said. I reached over Olivia and tapped my husband on the shoulder.

“Mel, what did you think?”

He sat up, smoothing out his pants.

“Olivia, stop acting fidgety,” he said. “Are you nervous about Chris Lankie? Is that why you’re so fidgety?”

Olivia peered down the hall towards the entrance.

“Is he here?” she said, blushing.

As more and more of Rex’s friends and relatives filed into the parlor, Olivia tucked the speech into her purse beside individually wrapped Maxi pads and a tin of Altoid mints.

“Why are you putting it away?” Mel said. He waved at several of his aunts and uncles who had flown into Ohio from their retirement homes in Florida. They were the tannest attendants to walk into the parlor. The rest of Rex and Millie’s friends and family members lived in Ohio, where the winters are below freezing and the only suntans in February come from ultraviolet light bulbs or spray bottles.

“I don’t need *him* to hear the speech before I’m ready to give it,” Olivia said.

“What’s it matter if *he* hears it before you’re ready to give it?”

“He’s the only man who I ever had *you-know-what* with.”

“So?”

“He knows what I look like without any clothes on. It makes me feel—filthy in front of Dad.”

“Dad’s not watching from inside his coffin.”

“I shouldn’t have invited Chris Lankie,” Olivia said.

“Why did you invite him?”

“He’s family.”

Mel didn’t answer. He sighed and rubbed his eyes like he was digging out crusted balls of eye snot.

“I’m going to practice the eulogy in the bathroom,” Olivia said. “Candace, was anyone waiting on the bathroom?”

“The director’s suit was hanging on the door,” I said.

“I’ll knock,” Olivia said and made her way through the crowd. Mel sighed again.

“Chris is trying to get her inheritance,” he said, once she was out of listening distance.

“Really?” I said. “Is that what Olivia said?”

“It’s not her that told me, only my intuition. Why else would he fly all the way over from his tattoo store and who knows what family he has back in New Jersey? I know he’s got a second family. Where are they? They probably sent him here on a mission to take Olivia for everything she inherits.”

“Don’t turn it into a conspiracy, Mel. Maybe Chris just wants to pay his respects to your father.”

“Respects? Chris never gave a darn about my father. He never gave a darn about Olivia, either. Just her naivety. Here’s what he knows: she’s got money now that both her parents are dead. He figures the house is going to be sold next year, too, so he wants to make an ‘appearance’ here to get on her good side.” (He used air quotes when he said the word “appearance.”) “I just hope she doesn’t turn back into the high school girl who got crushed. I’m more worried about her emotions than her money.”

I took the empty spot on the loveseat beside Mel, and we hugged each other.

“Let’s not worry about conspiracies or inheritances today,” I said. “You’re a pallbearer again, aren’t you?”

He nodded.

“Why don’t you just focus on being a pallbearer?”

We sat together for another thirty minutes until the parlor was full people and then we made our way into the room where the service was going to be held. The casket, the top half of which was open, stood behind the wooden lectern at the front of the room. Wreaths and bouquets of chrysanthemums leaned against the base of the casket. We hung our coats over two metal folding chairs in one of the middle rows. Chris Lankie walked into the room once we were seated. He chose a chair directly in front of us. Except for a receding hairline that ended midway up his skull, he seemed almost unchanged from the kid in the football picture who wore the horn-rimmed glasses as a prank on his head coach. The back of his neck was tattooed with the letters “CL.” Only the top half of each letter appeared over the collar of his white dress shirt. He turned

around in his seat to shake Mel's hand. He was clean-shaven, and his neck was speckled with red bumps from his razorblade.

"Olivia going to be giving the eulogy for Rex?" Chris said.

"She's practicing in the bathroom," Mel said. "How's the tattoo business treating you back in Jersey?"

"Don't have it anymore."

"Sell it?"

"Went under."

"Sorry to hear," Mel said.

Chris shrugged. "I'm getting into a tech school," he said. "Gonna work with computers."

Mel rubbed his thumb and index finger together like he had dollar bills between them.

"Should be good money," he said.

"Once I get started it'll be good money, sure. But in the meantime I've gotta take out student loans." Chris turned around so that his legs were on the side of his chair and his chest faced Mel's chest square on, as though he were lining up against a player on an opposing football team. He scratched the red bumps on his neck.

"Razorblade gave you quite a burn this morning, didn't it?" Mel said.

Chris nodded.

"Forget your ointment?" Mel said.

"Have you ever taken out student loans?" Chris said.

"When I was getting my bachelor's."

"How's paying off the interest?"

"Better than paying off a house."

“I’ve paid off a house.”

“Then, student loans shouldn’t be a problem for you.”

“I had my wife’s help with the house.”

“She won’t give you her help on the student loans?” Mel said.

Chris fell silent. He blinked several times, but still said nothing. He tightened his black necktie and smoothed it, although it already appeared pretty smooth to me.

After the silence lasted about thirty seconds, Chris stood and said, “Are you going to pay your respects before the service? I’ll walk up with you and your wife.” Mel remained seated.

“You go ahead,” he said. “We didn’t bring a wreath. We don’t need to see his body until after the service.”

“Sure?” Chris said.

“You go ahead.” Once Chris was gone, Mel looked at me.

“Just like I thought,” he said. “He needs money. His tattoo store flopped.”

“You hush, Mel,” I said. “Why wouldn’t you pay your respects to your father?”

“And did you hear what he didn’t say? Nothing about his wife when I asked him. I’m warning you Candace, she put him up to something. They’re after Olivia’s inheritance.”

I shushed him and placed his hand in mine, petting it. “Don’t start on the conspiracies, dear. Just be a pallbearer today. For Rex. Why wouldn’t you pay your respects?”

“I don’t like the way the corpses’ faces look when they’re all made up,” he said. “They look like they’ve been painted on a block of wood. My dad wasn’t a block of wood. He was a real person. Like Pinocchio.”

Shortly afterwards, the friends and family members from the parlor filed into the seating area and the service opened with the funeral home director introducing the reverend from a

nearby congregation who led the group in prayer. He then read the passage in Ecclesiastes from the Byrds song. During Millie's service, he used a quote from Bob Dylan's "Forever Young." As far as I knew, Rex and Millie did never attended church regularly during their lives. The pastor who spoke at their services was a stranger to both of them, brought in by the director as a fill-in.

After the reverend's mini-sermon, Olivia was called forward to give the eulogy she wrote. She rose from her seat in the front row next to her daughter and took her place behind the lectern. As she spoke, she dabbed her eyes with a wad of Kleenexes. Her gaze was fixed downwards at her papers as though she did not intend for a single word to come out unscripted. At one point in the eulogy, after the words "terse sayings," she surveyed the audience and spotted Chris Lankie in the row in front of us. The mere sight of him caused her to stammer and she did not look up from her papers for the remainder of the speech.

After Olivia, the director of the funeral home stood from his seat and announced that the body was going to be delivered to its final resting place. As the funeral goers made their way past the casket row by row, Mel fell silent and I could tell he was on the verge of crying and was trying not to show it in front of the people around him. He didn't cry at his mother's funeral until after we got to Olivia's house. Then, he walked into the bathroom, closed the lid on the toilet, and I heard him sobbing through the door while he thought I was in the kitchen making a pizza kit with Olivia.

When it came our time to stand, his face showed the solemnity of a bulldog's. He trailed me with his hand on the small of my back. In his casket, Rex wore a pink carnation pinned to the pocket of his suit. His lips looked like they were made out of plastic, almost like the funeral home replaced his old lips with the lips of a doll. The scar from the table leg accident with Millie was nearly invisible under the makeup on his face. Mel fought back a sniffle.

“It’s okay if you cry,” I said. “You don’t have to hide it from me or Olivia or your aunts and uncles from Florida.” He rubbed his eyes. A single tear streamed down his cheek, but no more. I didn’t feel like crying anymore, because I had already done my crying at Millie’s funeral. We walked on.

When we came outside, Mel waited at the door for the casket with the other pallbearers. He crushed a dead cricket under his shoe, probably the same one he saw two days before, the one that reminded him of Jiminy Cricket. Olivia was already in the backseat with her seatbelt buckled across her waist when I made it to the SUV. Mel followed once the casket was loaded into the hearse. I started the engine and remained parked until I saw the hearse exit the parking lot and the vehicle to our left leave in pursuit of it. We joined the procession. Olivia sobbed softly but Mel held back his tears until he could express his grief on a toilet lid.

“Do you have another pizza kit back at the house?” I said to Olivia in the rearview mirror. Her face was buried in her wad of Kleenexes. She looked up.

“Do you want me to make it for lunch?” she said.

“I’ll help,” I said.

“We’ll have the one with miniature pepperonis in the sauce.”

“Sounds great. Do you like miniature pepperonis, Mel?”

He nodded.

“Olivia and I are going to make a pizza kit when we get home. Were you listening to that?”

He nodded again, staring at the specks of white dust on the dashboard. I wanted him to be sure that the bathroom was open once we got back. To every mourner his own.



I forgot that Rex was a member of the armed forces until he was given a twenty-one gun salute by military men at his gravesite. He was sent to the Pacific in summer of 1945, but before he ever saw live combat President Truman dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima, and Rex returned home to Marietta to meet his future wife and raise a family. He remained a lifelong member of the American Legion without ever aiming a rifle at the enemy. Although he was entitled to a free college education under the G.I. Bill, he elected never to return to school but instead spent the rest of his life having never completed the eighth grade.

A low mound of earth covered Millie's grave. After Rex's casket was lowered into the ground, Olivia, Mel, and I headed back towards the SUV. Mel grabbed me.

"Do you mind if I drive?" he said. "I'm going to take a detour."

I handed over the keys.

"Take us wherever you want to go," I said. "But remember, I still want to celebrate Valentine's Day at home. Nothing special, just a dinner with my husband to hear about his parents. Are you going to buy a wreath for the graves?"

"I will, but first I want to look for Mom's old farmhouse," he said.

"Do you remember what it looks like?"

"There should be a chicken coop with a yellow roof up there in those hills. The chicken coop marks the old farmhouse."

"Is it still standing?" I said.

"I'm going to find out."

As we were buckling our seatbelts, we heard a tap on the back window next to Olivia's seat. It was Chris Lankie. He gave the signal to roll down the window.

“What do you want?” Olivia said. I stared at Chris in the side view mirror. I couldn’t tell if his face was ruddy from the cold or from crying. His eyes didn’t show signs of any tears.

“Before I went back to Jersey, I just wanted to tell you I’m sorry for your losses,” he said, wiping his nose on his black woolen glove. I couldn’t tell where his sniffles were coming from, either.

“Why did you accept my invitation, Chris?” she said.

He was silent.

“Did you at least say hi to your daughter?” she said.

“I said hello,” Chris said. “Why did you send me an invitation if you didn’t want me to accept it?”

“I invited you for her, not for me.”

“Do you know I lost my business?”

“The tattoo parlor?”

“It went under.”

“How?”

“I couldn’t keep it afloat after I lost half my bank account.”

“You’re divorced, aren’t you?”

He nodded.

“I suspected that you were,” Olivia said. “And broke? Do you have a plan?”

“I’m getting into computers,” Chris said.

“Tech school?”

He nodded. “Should be good money,” he said and rubbed his fingers together like he had dollar bills between them. He glanced at Mel in the driver’s seat, but Mel was resting his head on

the window, glaring out over the field at the cemetery. The fog on the glass advanced and receded with his breathing.

“Are you looking for a school here or in Jersey?” Olivia said.

“Jersey,” Chris said.

“Then, I still don’t get it, Chris. Why did you accept my invitation? Do you remember when I was still pregnant and I invited you to the Murrow family picnic on the Fourth of July? Do you remember what you told me?”

“What?”

“You said, ‘I’d rather pay alimony checks than spend the rest of my life in Marietta eating hot dogs and waving sparklers with your hilljack family.’ What made you come back now to see my ‘hilljack family’? Is it because you’ve fallen flat on your face and see you’re no better than a hilljack yourself? Is that it?”

“I came to say I’m sorry,” Chris said. “I’m sorry I said that. I’m sorry I walked out on you. I finally know what it feels like to get walked out on.”

Olivia turned her face away from him and blew her nose. It was snot that was not from the frigid February air, but from the funeral home, where the heating unit was running at seventy-seven degrees.

“I’m glad to hear you apologize,” she said. “I forgive you. Do you know that after all these years I kept your football picture in my living room?”

Chris chuckled. “Really? I thought you would have lit a match to that picture years ago.”

“The horn-rimmed glasses gave me a kick.”

Chris was beaming. “I’m glad they could.”

There was silence for a moment from both of them.

“It’s getting cold with the window down,” Olivia finally said. “We better get going.”

“I’m not going to keep you,” Chris said. “Again, I’m sorry about your losses.” He peered into the car and waved a gloved hand at Mel, who was still looking out the window, his breath advancing and receding on the glass. “Sorry about your losses, Mel,” he said. “May Rex and Millie rest in peace.”

Mel turned his head, as though snapped awake from a nap. He gave a nod in recognition of Chris’s wave but remained silent. He turned the key in the ignition and revved up the engine. Chris backed away from the SUV and Olivia rolled up the window. I waved at Chris Lankie as we backed out of the parking space. As we were driving out of town, Mel cranked up the heat.

“He left the window down a long time, didn’t he?” he said. “It’s like a refrigerator in here.”

“Don’t be sour with Chris,” I said. “He sounded truly repentant. Wouldn’t you say so, Olivia?”

“As far as I could tell,” she said. “Truly repentant.”

I rubbed Mel’s arm through his coat to warm him with the friction.

“If it’s a conspiracy, his family didn’t put him up to it,” I said. “He doesn’t even have one anymore. You were an excellent pallbearer today.”

As we drove up the hill in search of Millie’s old farmhouse, Mel whistled to himself.

“Is that ‘When You Wish Upon a Star’?” I said.

He paused and whistled the next several notes as though to figure out what song he was whistling.

“Yes, I guess it is ‘When You Wish Upon a Star,’” he said. “I squashed Jiminy Cricket today. It wasn’t really Jiminy, anyway. Sometimes I think I believe in a soul. Even for crickets.”

We drove for fifteen minutes through the countryside that enveloped Beverly, but found no sign of a yellow-roofed chicken coop. Mel stopped at the bottom of a hill along a barbed wire fence that went around a frozen field. The posts were leaning against the slope of the hill. At the center of the field was a stone foundation of what could have been a barn or a farmhouse, but it was impossible to tell from only the foundation. He got out, and I followed. Olivia stayed inside the SUV. She must have known we wouldn't find the farmhouse. We left the heat on for her.

"This could have been it," Mel said, gazing over the field at the skeletal remains of the building.

"When was the last time you saw the farmhouse?" I said.

"When I was five, we had Christmas here. After that, my grandparents decided to stop being chicken farmers. They moved to Cincinnati."

I scanned the field as far as I could see in either direction.

"Do you see a chicken coop anywhere?" I said.

Mel shook his head and shoved his hands into his pockets. He fell back against the headlight of the SUV.

"Let's go to Olivia's, have lunch, and pack," I said. "It's all we can do. The chicken coop is gone. If we hurry home, we can still salvage the rest of Valentine's Day for alone time."

Mel pounded the hood of the SUV with his fist.

"Enough about Valentine's Day already, Candace," he said. "We'll get plenty of alone time the next thirty years of our lives. I can drive you home if you're going to eat lunch back at Olivia's, but I'm going to buy a wreath, come back here to Beverly, and spend rest of my afternoon finding that chicken coop. Is that clear? I don't care if the chicken coop is abandoned

by all the mother hens and has rotten chicken eggs inside. I'd eat one of them in memory of my father right now."

He walked around to the driver's side and before he got in, he looked at me over the roof.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you," he said. "Happy Valentine's Day, honey."

"It's okay," I said, pushing back a snuffle for the first time since Millie's funeral two days earlier. "Happy Valentine's Day."

He stooped into the driver's seat. Before I followed, I took one more survey of the land, but there was no sign of a yellow-roofed chicken coop.

## The Grin

May 5, 2012

9:22 AM

Look at him. Look at the way his grin reflects in the computer monitor. He is watching me type this now. Watching every keystroke. I wonder, does he know what I'm typing? Is he able to read these words? If so, does he realize that I'm writing about him? Yes. He must. We are the only two here. There is no one else—no one but my landlord—I could be typing about when I use the words “he” and “him.” I am not discreet in what I do. Even as I type—pitter-patter, pitter-patter on the keys, like drops of rain—my eyes go from my keyboard to him, from him to my keyboard. He simply grins. I will not say a word to him in response, but continue to type.

He came to me this morning after I hit the snooze button on the nine o'clock alarm. I heard the thuds of his socked feet on the wooden steps as though they were a second alarm that I could not shut off without stepping out of bed into the cold and wallop him square in his

snooze button with my bare fist. But I did not want to break my hand on a snooze button, so I did not shut him off. I wonder now if it was worth the self-restraint. Once he was at the top of the stairs, he picked up the issue of *Deer and Deer Hunting* that lay on my countertop and rolled it into a monocular. He smacked me on the hip. It was a poor use of a monocular, in my opinion.

“What’s this magazine you’re reading?” he said, smacking me again, this time on the elbow. “When do you ever have the time or money for deer hunting if you do not have the time for work or the money to pay me the rent? Pay me the rent.”

He unrolled the magazine and tossed it on the pillow next to me on the queen-sized bed. The photo on the front cover showed a smiling father and son, dressed in camouflage, who knelt over a deer carcass in a field of dried-out cornstalks. A caption that ran along the bottom of the cover, unrelated to the content of the photo, advertized “New Gear for ’96” at a Wisconsin outfitter. I am not a current subscriber to *Deer and Deer Hunting*, nor was I one in 1996, but I bought that particular issue from a used bookstore that carried back issues of *Deer and Deer Hunter* along with other magazines it categorized under “Men’s Interest.” The cover struck my eye because of its idyllic depiction of a deer hunt.

“I don’t have your rent,” I said, not bothering to roll onto my back or the other side of my body in order to face my landlord. “You will have to leave me in peace.”

I closed my eyes, expecting to hear him descend the stairs again shortly because he never makes a visit to my apartment unless he intends to inquire about the month’s rent. Never once, save for this morning, has he paid me anything akin to a social visit, perhaps to sip an iced tea, solve a crossword puzzle, and watch a feature length documentary on the Trail of Tears, which I would be more than happy to showcase as one of the many gems in my extensive collection of bargain-priced movies. I thought I merely had to wait out his eviction threats and I would be free



to assume my morning routine of journaling. (I journal prior to taking my shower so that I can reminisce on my dreams from the previous night while they are still as vivid in my mind as the inkblots in a Rorschach test.) But I have waited out his eviction threats and yet he remains in my apartment, grinning.

“Do you know what the date is today?” he said. I switched off the alarm on the nightstand so that it would not go off again. The sweet splendor of a second snooze would have to be postponed for another morning. I was fully awake.

“The first?” I said. “I have a grace period to pay you, don’t I?”

“A grace period? Today is not the first, you bum. It is the fifth. Your grace period has expired. Now, pay me the rent. You owe three months, but I am only asking for April this morning.”

He threw the covers off of me and exposed my genitals to the morning breeze that entered the apartment through the window and caused the curtains to flap lightly against the frame. I cupped myself.

“Oh my, it looks like you can’t even afford clothes anymore,” he said. “What chance do I have of getting my rent?”

“I have clothes,” I said. “Just not clothes for bed. I prefer to sleep in the nude. Why do you think I am bundled up under all the covers in early May? For the sake of suspense when I flashed you?”

I rolled out of bed and trotted unclothed to my one hundred percent cotton Fruit of the Looms that were slung over the stool at the kitchen counter because I didn’t want to place them in the dryer for fear that they would shrink into a kids’ size fourteen. I despise underwear that pinches my crotch.

“I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that you are a flasher,” he said. “You must find something besides cheap movies and hunting magazines to fill your time.”

“I journal,” I said and stepped into my Fruit of the Looms, the bulge of which was adequately roomy.

“Well, good. I hope you are writing a *New York Times* bestseller and that you have it published in the next week or two. Otherwise, this is the month you are going to get evicted. Your grace period is at a permanent end with me, I’ll assure you.”

Saying nothing in return, I opened my laptop and typed the password to bring up my desktop background of Jesus Christ clutching a latched, hardbound copy of the Bible against his chest. I assume the painting is from the post-Guttenberg era and is not intended as an historical representation of the self-proclaimed Son of God. I discovered the image two days ago during a Google Image search for the words “Jesus Christ” and have kept it as my background ever since because I feel that, in a very short while, I will be in need of a savior, a redeemer, and a canceller of my debts. (That is, if everything goes according to plan. Never mind about that for now, though. I am still being closely watched. He is no longer grinning into the computer monitor, but has moved to the refrigerator to check my food supply. He wants to see whether or not I am stealing his groceries. It is the only reason I am able to write more freely at the moment and mention anything at all about my plan. But that’s enough of this talk for now. I wish to journal about the events that transpired several minutes ago. I promise a detailed confession of my plan to whomever confiscates the Word documents contained on this laptop’s hard drive.)

As the Jesus with hardbound Bible background appeared on my monitor, my landlord picked up the hunting magazine from my bed and examined the cover. He began to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” I said.

“Do you realize you’ve been reading a publication from 1996?” he said. “At least I know you’re not spending your rent money on magazine subscriptions. You probably picked this one out of a dumpster, you bum, as you were scrounging for your lunch. Why the heck do you have a hunting magazine from ’96, anyway? Can you only afford clothing from sixteen years ago?”

He rolled the magazine into a monocular again and raised it over his head as though he were going to swat me with it. The motion caused me to flinch as I opened Microsoft Word and watched his reflection in the dark gray border around my blank document. He lowered the monocular and laughed. I turned to face him.

“You thought I was going to wallop you again, didn’t you?” he said. “Heh, heh, heh, it would serve a fly right to be swatted. That’s all I have living in my apartment, isn’t it? A fly? You sure pay me the same rent that I would expect out of a fly. And I bet you lick your meals off pieces of dung, too, don’t you? Heh, little fly. You better buzz yourself on out of here when I hand you the eviction notice. Otherwise, I will swat you, and smash you into goo.”

He laid the magazine down beside me on the tiled countertop and then he curled his upper lip around his gums to reveal a row of coffee-stained incisors. I took my eyes away because I couldn’t bear to look at it. The grin.

“You’ll get what is due to you soon enough,” I said. “Be patient.”

“I have been more than patient with you,” he said. “If you were not so adamant in claiming this as your parents’ old property, then I would not be as merciful as I have been towards you. I would have tried to have you evicted after a second consecutive month of not paying me the rent.”

“I owe you my sincerest gratitude,” I said. “Like I said, be patient and, in a little while, you will learn what it means to receive my sincerest gratitude. And if you must know, I did not

pick the hunting magazine out of a dumpster, but I bought it at a used bookstore because the cover struck me.”

“The cover struck you?” His grin widened in the computer monitor. “You’re right, it did strike you. Only a few minutes ago it struck you when you were lying in bed. It nearly struck you again as you were sitting here at your laptop. What’s so appealing about a dead deer in a dead cornfield? Does roadkill make you hungry? Are you that desperate for a meal, you vulture?”

“You don’t need to know.”

“C’mon, Beaky, out with it. You’ll catch Bugs for momma vulture if you keep your head up with your long, shaved neck.”

I glanced at the boy and his father who knelt over their buck’s carcass, content with the result of their day’s sport, content with the father-son bond that was forming between them as though, in that moment, they realized the affection of Telemachus for Odysseus and Odysseus for Telemachus as they slaughtered Penelope’s suitors.

“It’s the father and son in the photo,” I said. “It’s something I long to get back.”

“Something you long to get back?” he said. “How endearing. You wish to become fourteen again. This big boy world has grown too much for you, hasn’t it? It’s no wonder you can’t find a job. You’ve caught a touch of the Peter Pan syndrome with all your lollygagging.”

“Yes, I suppose I have,” I said. “That’s all it is. A touch of the Peter Pan syndrome. Thank you for making me aware of it. Now I can finally move on and look for work. Thank you for your assistance.”

“You’re welcome. I expect to get my rent in the immediate future, since you are ready to find work.”

I nodded in acquiescence. The grin on his face grew still wider as I began to type.

\* \* \*

11:34 AM

My brother will be here soon. I am sure of it. When he comes, I will hear him in the driveway. There are tin cans attached to the back of his car on a string. He got married two weeks ago. His wife died of an aneurysm on the plane to the honeymoon. She wasn't a flyer. He never threw away the cans. When he comes, he will drive the car with the tin cans. He calls it his junker now that his wife has forever vacated the passenger's seat. He won't care if he stains the trunk with blood. I am sure of it.

Before my brother comes, I wish to do one more thing. Make a confession. This morning I bludgeoned my landlord to death with a wrench. What is today? It's the fifth, I know. But does the calendar in the bottom right corner of my computer screen lie in saying that it is Saturday? I do not keep track of the day of the week like I used to. What is the point when I am unemployed and have a seven-day weekend? What is today? Is it Saturday? Yes, I believe it is Saturday. The TV channels were showing the cartoons this morning. Don't the TV channels only show the cartoons on Saturdays? Yes. I believe so. At least for people like the owner of this property, who only had the basic channels. He lived and died a modest man. Modest, at least, in terms of finances. Hence, why he lived in this drafty house. Hence, why he did not have satellite television, along with more cartoons.

I killed the landlord because he didn't belong in this house or in the apartment over the garage. It used to be my parents' house; it used to be their apartment. What place did he have threatening to evict me from my parents' old house if I didn't pay the rent, even if I didn't pay the rent for a third consecutive month? The ego in some people. Then again, maybe it was not this exact house that my parents owned. But I am certain that my parents once lived in

Appalachian Ohio in a house similar to this one. I am certain that there is at least some resemblance. My parents have described our old house to me in detail since we moved away. Like this property, ours also had stables for horses, a two-story garage, and a tree with fan-shaped leaves that my mom said was called a ginkgo. My dad said it smelled like the cat's vomit. My parents' house was also drafty. But that is my childhood. I don't wish to dwell on it. It has next to nothing to do with what I am writing now. It has next to nothing to do, I assure you, with why I killed the landlord on the day that the morning cartoons were on.

I wish to get more to the point.

Let's start with the murder weapon. Let's start with why I chose to use the wrench. Certainly, I had other options. In the board game *Clue*, you can guess the wrench, the revolver, the knife, the candlestick, the steel pipe, or the rope. I had all of these items, and more, at my disposal. And yet, I chose the wrench. Well, truth be told, I did not have the revolver, but there are other firearms—hunting rifles—mounted on the wall in the lounge room. They are mounted there in place of stuffed deer heads, I suppose. In place of trophies of the hunt. Before it came into the last owner's hands, this house belonged to a hunter who couldn't kill his own dinner. So he kept his rifles on the wall, emptied of all their ammo.

But, again, I wish to get more to the point.

I am writing a confession, not a story of the luckless deer hunter. The wrench, I believe, can teach us a thing or two about the nature of good and evil. Take the wrench. The man who invented the wrench first saw its potential to tighten bolts. He patented his invention. The man who owned the wrench also saw the wrench's intended design to tighten bolts, yet at the same time he saw its potential to be used as a club. So, he bludgeoned the owner of the property to death. Hence, the nature of good and evil begins with a thing in existence designed to fulfill a

specific purpose. The thing in itself is good, granted that it is used to fulfill its intended purpose. Yet, if the thing, which in itself is good, is used to fulfill some other purpose besides that which it was designed to fulfill, then the thing is no longer the good thing it was designed to be. It is an evil thing, coated in grease and blood. On the hardwood floor of the lounge room, it lies beside the victim's body, which, too, is coated in grease and blood.

When my brother gets here, he will park outside the garage in the gravel driveway, and the cans will stop rattling behind his car. I will go out in the fog and late morning sunlight to meet him. We will be together again. Just us two. I will not be alone, all alone inside the apartment over the garage, as my fingers go pitter-patter, pitter-patter on these keys, like drops of rain, like drops of blood. But when my brother comes, it will be like the Saturday mornings when we used to wake up at seven a.m. to watch the cartoon with the baby duck in the diaper with the build of a full-grown man who was named Baby Howie or Baby Hughie or Baby Henry. I forget which. We were happy then. Just us two. But where did we used to wake up and see each other? Which lounge? Was it this one, the one I'm now sitting in, typing this confession? Or was it another? What about these dust bunnies on the floor, floating in the puddle of blood? Are they the same ones that Mom missed with her broom when she swept the hardwood? When my brother comes, I will ask him to sit Indian-style alongside me in the dust bunnies in front of the television as we used to do when we were children pressing channel up, channel up, channel up until we found the channel with the cartoons. Our shirttails will sop up blood like a spilled sippy cup of cherry Kool-Aid. Then, we will discard the shirts and burn the evidence of my crime in the metal trash can along the fence that surrounds the horses' grazing land. The body will be discarded, too. We will dig both it and the blood-stained wrench a grave in the woods. There will be no more evidence then. None except for this document. My confession. You will not know

anything about the crime besides what I choose to tell you. I will tell you everything that is to the point.

But before I go any further, let me get a glass of water. My crime, it appears, has left me parched.

12:04 PM

There. I am quite refreshed. I will now proceed.

While I am coming clean about what I've done, I might as well come clean about my reasons for writing this confession in the first place. Truth be told, I am not satisfied with the murder. I'm ready to give myself up, accept my punishment, and move on from an unfortunate ordeal. The plan of covering up the crime may never actually come to fruition. I may be all talk. The way my brother responds to finding the dead body on the floor will determine our COA on the matter.

If you are paying attention, player, I have revealed to you two of the three cards you need to make an accusation against me and win the game. So far, we know the following details: in the lounge with the wrench. But in a game of whodunit, I have not told you the most crucial piece of information. I have not told you my name. I have not told you about myself. I wonder which character you have in mind that I am. Colonel Mustard? Professor Plum? Miss Scarlet? Mrs. White? Mr. Green? Mrs. Peacock? Of course, I am none of them. You may find the murder weapon and the location in the deck of cards, but you will not find me. My name is Samson Leo Leone. I was born the second of three sons to Mr. and Mrs. Bernard (better known as Bernie) Leone on July 22, 19—I will not tell you the precise year of my birth to protect myself from identity theft. There is only one of me. I do not wish for there to be another, poser Samson Leo



Leone opening a college savings account while I, the real deal, am snoozing on the bottom bunk of a nine-by-twelve cell in the state penitentiary.

My name, as you probably guessed, comes from the Biblical hero in the book of Judges. Since I do not intend to babble, I will not say more about my childhood than is necessary to understand my *modus operandi* for murdering my landlord. You will find, player, reader, confidant, whichever you prefer to be called, I did not murder out of financial burdens. No, quite the opposite. I intentionally heaped financial burdens upon myself—remaining unemployed, neglecting to pay my rent for a quarter year, and spending my savings on miscellaneous superfluities such as packs of gum, assorted puzzle books, and bargain bin movies from the local Wal-Mart—in order to provoke myself to murder. Buried inside of each and every one of us, we will find a murderer. It is only a matter of searching, a matter of instigating. Some of us merely refuse to be emboldened to murdering another human being when we find ourselves with all the right feelings in place to commit a homicide in cold blood.

My parents, though secular folk, were astute scholars on the major world religions and philosophical schools of ancient times. Throughout my childhood, we lived as a semi-nomadic clan who held pluralistic thinking as a core value as some families do table manners and the magic words “Please,” “Thank-you,” and “Excuse me, I belched.” I was taught that the greatest indiscretion to commit is not rudeness, but narrow-mindedness. My dad was a history teacher by profession, a woodsman at heart. His obsession for researching the historical landmarks of southern Ohio’s outdoors—among them, the Great Serpent Mound and the Hopewell Indian Mounds at Mound City in Chillicothe—prevented us from settling down at one residence for a substantial period of time. Wherever we moved, he kept his hunting rifles (like the ones in this house) mounted on the wall of our lounge room and always joked that they were placeholders for

the antlered head of the white-tailed deer he could never bring down in the Appalachian wilderness.

I wonder, if these rifles are really my dad's, why are they back here? My parents have not lived here since I was young enough to sit and watch cartoons. Are they here merely to haunt me? Also, why is the paint on the wall behind the rifles a lighter shade than the rest of the wall, as though it has remained in the shadow of a rifle for many years? Surely, we took Dad's rifles along in the U-Haul when we moved away. We would not have forgotten them. Maybe this is the same house we once lived in, after all, but these are different rifles. When we moved away, maybe my dad left the pegs in the wall for the next owners to mount items of their choice. Maybe the last owner of this house was a luckless deer hunter as well, and he balanced his own rifles on the pegs after each empty-handed return from the woods. A fatal move, if so. His resemblance to my dad did not become him. I began to recognize it one afternoon three months ago when he came into my apartment to ask about the rent and I caught his grin for the first time, but certainly not the last time, inside the reflection of my computer monitor. His grin resembled my dad on that day. Afterwards, I started to see it everywhere. The grin. Even in my own reflection in the computer monitor. My grin resembles my dad's, it also resembles my landlord's. The similarities between him and my dad made them—nay, us—seem like siblings, or clones.

But I want to get back to my early years. I must confront my childhood, not repress it. My parents' approach to raising children reflected their varied interests in Judeo-Christian as well as Greco-Roman cultures, and they elected a different experimental design for developing virtue and character in me and my brother. My brother, who is four years my senior, is named Rudolph (Rudy) Plato Leone because, not only was he reportedly born with a robust frame comparable in thickness to a sapling, but my parents intended him, as their firstborn, to be

educated in the finest Ivy League institutions and to bring glory to the Leone family name as a renowned politician in the image of Plato's philosopher-king, as described in *The Republic*. Yet, unfortunately for our surname, my brother was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia at age seventeen and dropped out of high school shortly afterwards in order to receive psychiatric treatment. Once placed on medication, he was able to complete his GED and apply for admission into a university, but his doctors advised that he attend a school close to home to minimize stress levels, which could aggravate his condition. Rudy ventured no farther than the University of Rio Grande (located close to where I am now, in Gallia County, Ohio) during his undergraduate years and obtained a degree in Computer Science. Today, he owns a used video game store in a suburb of Columbus. In his spare time, he enjoys hiking and spelunking, but has an aversion for hunting.

But I feel I am beginning to babble. Let me talk more about myself, and less about my brother's aversion for deer hunting. As it stands now, he does not have a confession to make. In a little while longer, I will know whether or not he means to become my accomplice in sweeping up the mess I have made of the landlord's cranium.

As for me, I, Samson Leo Leone, was named after the Old Testament hero who could wrestle a lion with his bare hands because my parents determined prior to my birth to raise me as a son devoted to the highest virtues of the post-exodus Semitic religion. I was to be their Nazirite, "dedicated to God from the womb," as the Scriptures read. Although my parents were agnostics, and viewed the notion of God as an unsupportable hypothesis founded on rudimentary scientific explanations of the natural world, they nevertheless "dedicated" me to said unsupportable hypothesis because of the beneficial moral instruction they located in ancient Hebrew holy texts.

Initially, they approached raising me as a Nazirite, according to my namesake, with utmost strictness. Through the first five years of my life, my hair never saw a razor, and my auburn locks grazed my shoulder blades as I frolicked about my parents' knees, never straying out of their sight, albeit at home, at the grocery store, or while touring the Bob Evans Farm on state route 588 near Gallipolis. When I entered kindergarten, however, my parents saw fit to act as my personal Delilah so that I could learn to recite the alphabet and transcribe my name without constantly pushing my hair out of my eyes. After registering for school (we were living in Chillicothe at the time, as Dad made back-and-forth visits to the Hopewell Indian Mounds), Mom placed me on a stool on the kitchen linoleum, a scrunchie adorning my head for the first time, and snipped off my ponytail. Although their standards for raising me eased from that point on in my childhood, they never relaxed completely. For example, I was supplied a kosher diet through high school and was forbidden wine and beer at dinner, even though my brother was permitted to consume alcohol at sixteen, according to the drinking age in Germany, which my parents adhered to in his case over the American laws. To this day, partly owing to my upbringing, and partly to addictive tendencies I recognize in myself that have the potential to turn a swig of merlot into a lifelong membership in Alcoholics Anonymous, I have never tasted a drop of fermented beverage.

Naturally, my parents, being the history buffs that they were, desired me to be instructed on the origin of my name because of its uncommonness next to ones like James, John, or Robert. Even before I entered grade school, they foresaw all the possible queries that my classmates—the uncultured little tykes—would pose to me about my given name and, in addition to a close-cropped trim, equipped me with informed responses to silence even the most relentless bullies. Bible lessons are among my earliest memories. I don't know if I ever fully answered this

question: why did I use the wrench? My childhood might supply insight into the mystery.

Perhaps I grabbed the wrench because, for a split second, my mind returned to Judges 15, in which Samson strikes down one thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey as he is delivered as a prisoner from the cave in Etam into the hands of the Philistines. Out of all the other weapons at my disposal—the firearm, the knife, the candlestick, the steel pipe, or the rope—the wrench seems to me like the best stand-in for the jawbone. It bears the closest resemblance in size, shape, and heft, does it not? I am a person who is keen on resemblances, even at a subconscious level. True, it has been ten-plus years since I revisited the Biblical account of my namesake, but who is to say that I did not turn to the wrathful Nazirite for guidance as I selected the wrench to murder the landlord? I was brought up to model Samson in every regard—from his hair, down to his food and drink. Why not also model my killing sprees after him, though mine, admittedly, are on a smaller scale?

Yet, you will argue that my single homicide is not rightfully termed a “spree.” To that, I have an objection. I struck the landlord this morning with more than enough blows to qualify as a “spree,” if there had only been more than two people in the room. My heart, mind, and soul were all set on a spree. I can assure you of that. The house merely lacked the victims to carry one out. I could have killed one thousand landlords, just as easily as I killed one. In fact, I believe I did not just attempt to kill one person this morning, but three. Along with the landlord, I attempted to kill my dad and myself. It is not just the landlord who should be lying prostrate on the hardwood floor this morning, grinning. It should be all three of us. But alas! I am an utter failure in the attempt because he does not even appear to be suffering in his death. Yes, I have killed him, but I have not erased the grin—our grin—from his face. It is still there, as though it were pressed into his face by a machine, like notches on the edge of a quarter. If only I could find a way to scrub

away his facial features (somehow accelerate the process of decay), then my homicide would bring me the relief I hoped it would, but so far hasn't during these last couple of hours. The anticipation of three months is proving to be quite a let-down, especially when I consider that I am now penniless and nearly every movie I own has no resale value.

So then, I am resolved. More has to be done to reach a point of closure. No matter how many strikes I administer with the wrench to the landlord's corpse, the grin will never be rubbed away, as long as it remains on me. But suicide, in more than just fantasy, is out of the question for me. Call me Hamlet, but I am not ready to reject the notion of an afterlife. I'd rather go the route of absolution and give repentance a try. I hope that by the time this confession is finished, it will bring about in me a semi-formed emotion of remorse. I have not arrived at one yet, only the idea, the possibility. So, for the next part of my confession, I wish to direct my statements no longer to the detective in you, but rather to the priest.

Reader, or Father, I've murdered my father. The likeness was near enough to be him. Oedipus did not realize the guilt for his crime until he was a father and a brother to his own children. I wish to avoid incest, and hopefully keep my eyes inside of my skull. These past three months, as I plotted my attempt on the landlord's life, I emailed my mom repeatedly to obtain a photograph of Dad taken several years ago while he was hunting black bears in Montana—likely not equipped with a rifle, but in the mold of Davy Crockett, felling his game with his tensed facial muscles. It is the most recent photo of Dad, snapped two days before he died of a stroke at age forty-eight. I wished to compare the similarities between his face and the landlord's to ensure that the resemblance I saw between them wasn't an illusion. However, perhaps it is for my good that Mom never accepted my invitation to come here and that she does not receive her sons as warmly now that she is widowed and we have both refused to take her in as a dependent. Not

that my intentions with *her* were ever dubious, as far as I am aware, but we all have a subconscious, don't we? Now that I have a murder to repent of, I don't need to add to it the weight of sexual sins.

But, if I am to seek absolution, and plummet no further into an abyss of remorse and self-loathing, how do I begin to feel the weight of my crime? If at all possible, I must take pity on the victim. I must empathize with him. I don't mean the landlord, of course, because he was merely an object, a pawn, on which I gratified a murderous impulse against a well-fortified king I could not find a way to checkmate—my father. If I first can take pity on him, the rest of the world's multi-billion population of terrorists, cyber predators, and Jonestown cult leaders will naturally follow. The landlord as well. It is for this reason that I must revisit my childhood, however much it pains me to do so. In particular, I must revisit an overcast Saturday morning in late November when the drizzle from the rainclouds left a sensation akin to a cold sweat in my arm hairs as I unloaded the hunting rifles from my dad's station wagon after another unsuccessful venture into the woods to shoot and disembowel an eight-point buck.

But first, another drink of water.

1:36 PM

Dad was not aware I was home that morning to unload the rifles from his station wagon. When we weren't renting out the apartment over the garage to a tenant, my brother and I used the TV for video game marathons on the Sega Genesis console. Our mutual favorite was the fighting game *Mortal Kombat*. Its two-player mode afforded us hours of button mashing as we hammered one another with rapid-fire punches, flying kicks, and an occasional fatality with the assistance of an unauthorized strategy guide. My go-to character against my brother was Sub-

Zero because, with one of the game's easiest combos to memorize, he could fire a blast of ice from his palms to freeze his opponent long enough to complete a crouching punch that depleted a tenth or so of the energy bar.

In our video game marathons, Rudy was by far the more skilled “kombatant,” as a game player is termed in the *Mortal Kombat* franchise. His handle on combo moves and his determination to commit button sequences to memory demonstrated his talent for gaming from an early age. Even if his fragile mental health had not squelched his political ambitions, I believe that Rudy's early days as a gamer would have inevitably led him to revisit his interest in gaming later in life, if not to own a used video game store, then at least to spend his free time aboard Air Force One or inside the Oval Office mashing the pea-sized buttons of a Game Boy Color. Who knows? Someday, if I am able to avoid a lengthy prison sentence, maybe I will join him as part-owner of the used video game store. Yes. I quite look forward to the day when I will find myself unshackled, and guiltless again as a kindergartener. I've heard that Rudy sometimes purchases Sega Genesis consoles and tests them in the back of the store to ensure that they are in working condition. The two of us will test the consoles together. But only with *Mortal Kombat*. We will relive our marathons, our button mashing, our rapid-fire punches, flying kicks, and the occasional fatality—granted that we are also able to purchase an unauthorized strategy guide.

On the morning I stepped out in the rain to unload the hunting rifles, I was alone in the apartment practicing against the CPU in hopes of duplicating a series of narrow victories I earned over Rudy the previous night. My dad was serving as Rudy's non-hunting adult that morning on his initiation into the pastime deified by Artemis, and my mom was out on an early shopping expedition for the holiday season. (As a secular family, we observed the winter solstice on or around the twenty-first of December in place of any major religious holiday such as



Christmas or Hanukkah. Our festivities included a gift exchange, a steak dinner, and indulgence in fermented beverages. Of course, owing to my devotion to the moral standards of a Nazirite, I never partook in the last portion of the celebration.)

I expected to have the property to myself for the entire afternoon, and I certainly expected my mom's return to precede my dad's. So, when I looked out the apartment window and spotted his station wagon barreling over the narrow strip of gravel driveway towards the garage, you can imagine my surprise and enthusiasm. At the time, my relationship with my dad was only tarnished by the unspoken, yet perceived competition my brother and I held among ourselves for his affections. Rudy provoked me into jealousy when he was invited, as the oldest, to be the first to obtain his hunting license. We anticipated a future in which both of us would accompany our dad on his hunts, so that, with all the variables more or less equal across the board, we could demonstrate to him which of us was the more skilled sharpshooter. I imagine if Dad had ever taken an interest in our video game marathons, the intensity would have increased to actual fistfights and attempted fatalities on each another.

Through the white, semi-transparent flower pattern on the curtains, I watched my dad and my brother exit the vehicle and follow the S-shaped garden path around the house to the entrance to the lounge room, located along the back patio. In accordance with his own routine, my dad would instruct Rudy to leave his camouflage hunting boots outside next to the coir doormat with the ivy border around the word "Welcome." They would each wring the sweat out of their socks and stuff them into the toes of their boots. Then, they would go into the kitchen and eat a chopped ham sandwich in place of a venison burger.

When I initially saw the station wagon returning home so early from the hunt, it occurred to me that my dad's losing streak against his antlered foe might have at last come to an end.

However, a glance at the roof of the vehicle indicated to me that it was not the case. I pushed the power button on the Genesis console in the middle of receiving a high kick from the CPU's kombatant, and the screen turned to an impenetrable field of black-and-white static. I switched off the power to cut off the audio, which blared in my ear like a waterfall slapping on jagged stones. The roof of the station wagon appeared the same once I stood nearer to it outside on the gravel. No slaughtered deer, either as wild game or as roadkill. Both of Dad's hunting rifles were laid across the backseat. I thought I would win points with Dad if I brought them in before Rudy came outside again to retrieve them himself. Each of the doors on the passenger's side was locked, and I saw through the window that the same was true for the driver's side. My only option was to try the door to the cargo area in back. It turned out to be not only unlocked, but unlatched as well. More points if I mention my heroics to latch it firmly, I thought. I pulled the door open over my head and jumped so that the hydraulics lifted the weight off my hands. I climbed over the backseat and opened the rear passenger's side door once I was squatted on the floor mat in front of the rifles. They were emptied of their ammunition, if they had ever been loaded that morning at all.

With both rifles laid out on the gravel beside the car, I climbed back over the seat and, leaning my body outside the car while ducking under the low height of the ceiling, reached with my fingertips for the door to the cargo area. My hand came within grasp of the handle, and I ensured that the door was latched by kicking it with my tennis shoes. I scooped the rifles into my arms after I exited the rear passenger's side door and slammed it shut behind me.

When I came to the back patio, the two pairs of camouflaged hunting boots were set out beside the doormat, as expected. There was no need to knock because the door was unlocked. I leaned the rifles against the wall because they began to slide out of my arms as I attempted to

push the door open. After I brought both rifles inside and balanced each on its respective set of wall pegs, I went into the kitchen. It was deserted. The fridge door was propped open by the bottom drawer, in which the deli meat was stored, along with assorted cheeses and half an onion in a resealable Ziploc baggy. The lid on the deli meat container was off. Dad would not like to see that he was losing valuable pennies on the electric bill or that the natural juices of his lunch were evaporating from their exposure to the dry kitchen air. I hurried to reseal the meat and closed the door. Two more points. Rudy would have to snipe a buck and educate himself on taxidermy in order to regain Dad's favoritism over me.

I was about to call for Rudy and Dad to locate them in the house, but then I noticed Rudy's flannel boxer shorts and his camouflage pants with neon orange suspenders strewn on the countertop. I figured he was taking a shower upstairs, because I would have been able to hear the water running in the downstairs bathroom. Still, there was no sign of Dad. He was never known to forsake his routines, especially when it came to deer hunting. He foresaw doing so as "unlucky," as though luck could have been a rarer commodity in his case. My parents' bedroom was on the way to the upstairs bathroom. I would peek through the door to ask how the hunting went, and maybe mention that the rifles were once again secured upon their pegs. I did not like to remain in their bedroom long, however, because Mom kept a collapsible wooden rack next to her dresser for drying her "delicates," which did not appear the least bit fashionable to me, or worth the special attention she gave them, given that there were no action pictures of DC comic heroes printed on the silk backsides. I did not like to stare at the rack long because Mom warned me once at the gift shop in the Bob Evans restaurant that boys were not supposed to see women's "delicates" when they were underneath their skirts. (I had been attempting to crawl between a woman's legs in the greeting card aisle because I mistook a red delicious apple pattern for

Superman's cape and I thought I should share with her that we were adorned in the same tightie whites.) I assumed the same rule on "delicates" also applied when they were hung out to dry on collapsible clothing racks.

Dad would frown upon an unsanitary prep surface, so I unclipped the suspenders from the waistband of the pants, folded Rudy's articles of clothing, and placed them on the stool that was pushed under the countertop. Another point. On my way upstairs, I stepped over the rest of Rudy's wardrobe: a neon orange vest, a camouflage jacket, a gray T-shirt with a burgundy Abercrombie logo across the chest, and a long sleeve thermal. The bathroom was open down the hall. When I think back on that morning, I wish this clue, combined with my brother's discarded clothes, would have deterred me from continuing up the stairs and instead inspired me to bolt back into the kitchen, at the very least at the fear of glimpsing my brother as he strolled the hall naked and popped white heads that formed in his sparse tufts of chest hair. However, these clues did not deter me from climbing the rest of the stairs or from entering my parents' bedroom.

If my childhood were a Word document, typed out once and stored among other files on my brain's C-drive that are given names such as "sleone\_birth," "sleone\_adolescence," and "sleone\_earlyadulthood," it is this next point in "sleone\_childhood" that I would attempt to locate with the keyword search "delicates" in order to draft a different plotline for the entire piece. However, as my backspace key is ineffectual at reordering real events in time-space, I must push on in my recollection without longing in vain to alter the past. My brother was not naked when I entered the bedroom and found him standing in front of the full body mirror nailed to the wall next to the nightstand, but instead he was dressed in a lace bra and a pair of black boyshorts from Mom's clothing rack. The boyshorts sagged in clumps where Rudy's lanky figure could not fill the place of our mom's. Dad knelt between him and the mirror and twisted

the bottom of a tube of dark purple lipstick, which, to this day, I do not ever remember seeing Mom purchase or wear.

“Mom’s delicates don’t fit you, Rudy,” I said in the doorway. “Take them off.”

Startled at the sound of my voice, Dad quit twisting the lipstick tube and hid it behind his back. He grinned the grin of my landlord, and the one written, it seems, in my genetic code. His upper lip revealed a row of coffee-stained incisors.

“You sc-scared me, Samson,” he said. “I thought you went out shopping with your mother. Your brother and I are just trying to have a little photo shoot. Your mother isn’t back yet, is she?” His hands shook as he brought the lipstick out from behind his back again and patted the carpet around his feet in search of the cap. Rudy turned around, a streak of purple running from the corner of his lip to his jaw line.

“I didn’t go with Mom,” I said. “She let me stay here so that she could shop for me without me finding out what she bought.”

“Excellent,” Dad said, grinning. “It’ll be a surprise. Kind of like the way you surprised me just now, eh? Tell you what, would you like to do an extra chore for me this week, or do you want your brother to be the only one who earns double allowance?”

“What do I have to do?” I said. “I brought in your hunting rifles from the car. They’re even on the pegs downstairs. I also cleared off the counter, closed your ham, and shut the fridge so you don’t have to give our college money to the electric company’s kids, like you say.”

“Excellent, Samson, excellent,” Dad said.

“I did all those things, too,” Rudy said. “If you’re going to give him double allowance for those things, then I should get triple allowance for helping you with your photo shoot.”

“I only went hunting once this week, Rudy,” Dad said. “Don’t lie. Lying is wrong.” He stood and walked towards me. His arms were wide to embrace me. If I could make use of my backspace key to alter this particular moment from that morning many years ago, I would have applied my *Mortal Kombat* training to striking his unguarded crotch with a series of rapid-fire punches.

“You will earn double allowance, Samson, if and only if you do exactly as your brother is doing right now,” he said. “You must choose a pair of Mom’s underwear from the rack—choose your favorite pair, a pair that feels smooth and silky under your fingertips—and then you must take off all your clothes and let me dress you up like Mom. What do you say? Do you want to be dressed up like Mom for double allowance?”

“I guess so,” I said. “If it’s for double allowance. But Dad, why are we doing this?”

“Your dad is going to take some pictures of you and your brother while you walk around and pretend to be Mom. Just do what you think she would do if she were jumping around on the bed in her bra and panties before a shower. Don’t you think she’d feel like taking them right off so she’s not too hot? Then, after we finish taking your pictures, I’m going to give them away to a friend who thinks pictures of little boys who dress up like their moms are very entertaining to look at. Doesn’t that sound fun? Don’t you want to make my friend very happy and entertained by your photo shoot? Certain ancient Greeks used to be very fond of boys your ages. I’m raising your brother to be like an ancient Greek, and your long locks make you look like a girl, anyway.”

He uncapped the lipstick and squeezed my cheeks the way that Mom squeezed them when I was a toddler and she needed to force feed Gerber’s apple sauce to me in order to ensure that I received the essential vitamins and nutrients for healthy growth and development.

At this point, I would like to say I answered “no” to his offer through my puckered lips, and that my under regions never knew the constraint of lacy underwear with no frontal bulge, but then I would be hard-pressed to account for the plastic eggs of Silly Putty, packs of green plastic army men, and Pez dispensers that I bought for my parents and my brother that year as gifts during our winter solstice celebration. Not only did I complete one photo shoot, but dozens over the next five years. I never learned who my dad’s “friend” or “friends” were who purchased the photos each month for private consumption. My hunch, however, is that there really was at least one other implicated party because Rudy and I continued to earn double allowance until Rudy’s body neared the end of puberty and (by the grace of God, if there is such a being to receive a prayer lobbed into the sky) his body hair and acne scars thwarted our rise as a stars in the child porn industry. But then again, perhaps my assessment is biased. I do not believe I have ever given up my early adoration for my father, even after he applied enough varied shades of women’s lipstick to my mouth to stain my childhood memories purple and rouge. Perhaps it is this very adoration that forever distorts my perception of him and prevents me from accepting that he was the sole viewer of our photo shoots. After all, the “friend” seemed to follow us from residence to residence throughout Appalachian Ohio, always with the same appetite for boys who dressed up like their moms.

I have always suspected that my brother’s onset of schizophrenia during his teen years is related to the trauma he experienced from Dad’s exploitation of his maturing body through those five years of photo shoots. Mental disorders such as schizophrenia, I’ve learned from research conducted in my spare time on [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com), may have roots in genetic and environmental factors. However, I will never view Rudy’s medical files to know how much information about our childhood he disclosed to his psychiatrists during his private treatment

sessions or to know for certain whether or not his relationship with Dad was as severely troubling to him as it has been for me. We never spoke to Mom about why Dad began giving us double allowance and, as far as I know, she has no knowledge to this day of her late husband's photography career.

At this point in time, I do not wish to provide further details regarding my upbringing. I merely wish to come to a place of remorse for my crime this morning. To do that, as I said earlier, I must find the will within myself to pity my father. But how? He spoiled my natural desires for the opposite sex. He emasculated me. To this day, I've never been able to lust after a woman without confronting the image of me standing in her underwear. I cannot even enjoy the simple pleasure of gazing at a panty rack in a department store as I pass through the aisles to the cash register. I always see my brother in place of the models on the posters. Since I am making confessions of all types, I might as well confess this: I am celibate, a virgin, and sometimes I even contemplate transforming myself into a eunuch. The only human being I may ever be comfortable kissing is my mother. And as I said earlier, I wish to keep my eyes in my skull. Castration may very well be the price I pay for 20/20 vision.

I recognized a mutual feeling of guilt in me and my brother following our first photo shoot. After we changed back into our normal clothes and hung Mom's "delicates" back on the clothing rack, we went into the apartment to play a series of two-player matches on *Mortal Kombat*. As we sat side-by-side on the carpet—Rudy as Scorpion, the canary-breasted ninja whose mask concealed a skull, and I as my go-to character Sub-Zero—Rudy paused the game and stretched out on his stomach with his face cupped in his hands.

"Aren't we going to finish the game?" I said. I dropped my controller on the floor and stared at Scorpion frozen midair on the screen after absorbing an uppercut from Sub-Zero.



“Moms don’t play *Mortal Kombat*,” he said. “We’re moms now.”

I shut off the power and, after sitting next to Rudy for several minutes in silence, left the apartment.

Perhaps Rudy and I could not articulate our emotions that afternoon, but we both knew what we had exchanged for double allowances, what we would never regain as long as we continued to participate in Dad’s photo shoots. Not only *Mortal Kombat*, but something more sacred, something I want back this morning, when Rudy parks in the driveway and the cans behind his car cease to rattle: brotherhood. Dad exchanged it, too, or something akin to brotherhood, when he decided to dress us up in his wife’s undergarments. He exchanged the cover photo of *Deer and Deer Hunting*. I don’t mean that he, Rudy, and I would have ever been placed on a magazine cover, but we could have had what the smiling father and son in the cornfield have. We could have had *innocence*. Yet, we bartered it away. And for what? All for instant gratification, all for double allowances, all to pinch a strip of silk between our butt cheeks.

So yes, reader, if I can pity my brother and me for our losses, then I can certainly pity my father for his, because we all three lost one thing during our bedroom photo shoots. We all three made a common exchange. My brother and I never knew a loving father? He never knew loving sons! As I would pity my own death, I now pity my father for his lifeless body that lies prostrate at my feet, grinning.